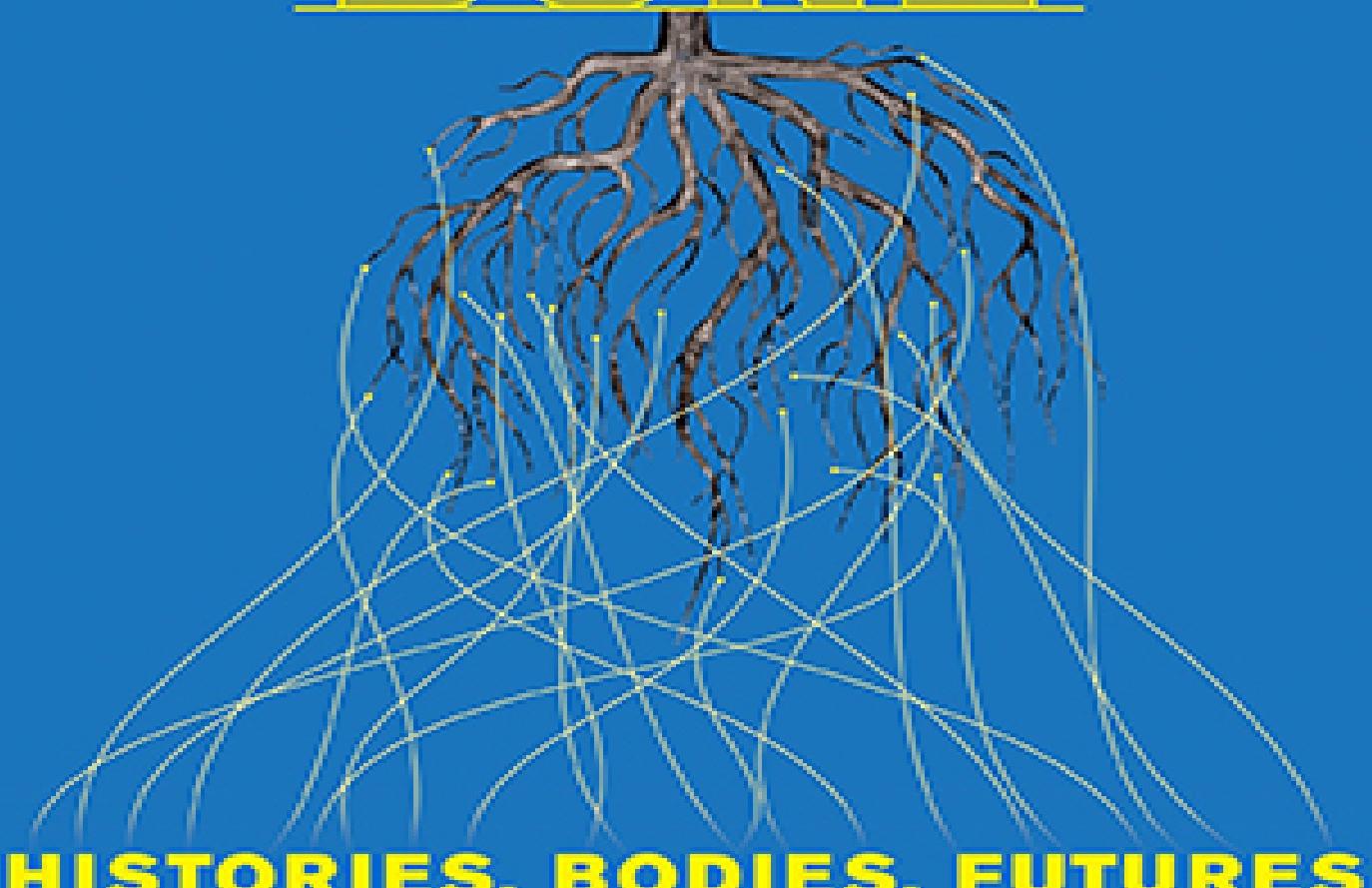


# **LIBERATED TO THE BONE**



**HISTORIES. BODIES. FUTURES**

**Susan Raffo**

**EMERGENT STRATEGY SERIES**

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# EMERGENT STRATEGY SERIES

*Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown

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# PRAISE FOR *LIBERATED TO THE BONE*

“This book speaks to the relationships we need for our collective liberation. This is a vibrant, complex, and a veritable feast for our hunger, our hearts, our collective spirits, and breath. Raffo speaks to our kin and asks us to shape our relationships to earth, to bodies, to histories, and transformation. Her words are a path toward shedding our fears and building new cosmologies for connection and healing. This book is medicine as necessary as blood, as bone, as air, as seeds, as water is to our collective memories and futures.”

—**Cara Page, Cultural Worker/Organizer, cofounding member of the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective**

“There is much talk in Indian Country about decolonizing our minds. Raffo has set readers on a path to decolonizing our bodies, our entirety. Unlearning, learning, and ‘being’ ourselves into healing from seven generations of dis-ease. And doing so willingly and ably in community—doing this together, collectively, for the better of the whole. Miigwech, Susan.”

—**Marcie Rendon, author of *Cash Blackbear Mysteries***

“Reading Susan Raffo is like coming home to what we know is true and didn’t quite know how to say. Her essays move us inward and forward. She grounds us in deep and ancient love and calls us to claim our own version, a fierce invitation to ourselves and each other. She teaches a poetry of belonging, she urges us to sacred truth, she offers such grace, all grounded in the imperative to heal into our mutual liberation. This book is a balm of truth telling, the kind we all long for and rarely find in our current culture of fear and denial. The truth will set us free and Susan Raffo’s book offers us a pathway into a kind of knowing that we desperately need and is long overdue. I am full of gratitude for Susan and her wisdom.”

—**Tema Okun, author of *The Emperor Has No Clothes***

“Susan shows us how intergenerational memories are alive in our cells. How the longings for love and justice are calling to us from our bodies. She weaves together embodied healing and organizing for liberation, revealing it as one cloth. This book will usher you into radical practices for freedom.”

—**Staci K. Haines, author of *The Politics of Trauma***

“This book literally feels like lifeblood to me as a survivor, an activist, a writer, and a white person unlearning whiteness. We need Susan Raffo’s stories, wisdom, and questions as we inch toward liberation. With brilliance, compassion, and ferocity, *Liberated to the Bone* helps connect us to our bodyminds, to each other, and to liberatory strategies.”

—**Eli Clare, author of *Brilliant Imperfection***

## FOREWORD

When it comes to healers, sometimes I think we don't truly meet them until we are in their hands, on their tables, in their care. In 2010, I was a national coordinator for an event called the US Social Forum in Detroit, and by day three my system was completely overwhelmed and blown out. I walked down to the Healing Justice Practice Space to see if anyone could help, and all I remember is stepping into a basement conference center room on the edge of tears. It felt like a circle of people surrounded and held me as my body began to shake uncontrollably but when I opened my eyes there was just the blessed, knowing face of Susan Raffo. She normalized the somatic release I'd had, affirmed the wisdom of my body, gave me water and gentleness, and sent me on my way. I walked down a hallway and entered a massive room where I got to sing "A Change Is Gonna Come" to Grace Lee Boggs in celebration of her birthday.

What I have understood from the inside out since that day was that Susan Raffo knows a ton about the body, and about organizing, and about Healing Justice, and about what movement workers need in order to continue being a part of complex efforts to generate liberation.

A few years later, I started to see these blog posts that Susan was sharing on social media. Without hyperbole, I must say I was astounded by her writing—both the poetic style, the gentle healer-teacher energy I remembered from being in her hands, and the brilliant juxtapositions she was making between the body and movement work and this moment in time. I found myself eagerly awaiting each post. I finally couldn't take it anymore, I asked if she'd ever let us publish her as part of the Emergent Strategy series. She said yes!

In the pages that follow, Susan Raffo sets us firmly in the conversation about Healing Justice as one of the people who has helped develop the framework. She guides us through the work of stopping violence from the body up, helps us land in the current moment of not just our own bodies but the relationships and communities we must form around ourselves as we recover, and finally lays out how we create the conditions that allow the deepest healing. This book is equal parts poetic and practical. As Susan

reminds us, there is no such thing as individual trauma—she helps us understand how to heal in community across generations and through lineage.

Now, I invite you into the experience of feeling mended, shaped, released, and inspired by this collection. And once it heals you, pass it on to a friend. Together we can heal.

—adrienne maree brown

# INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine once shared with me this story: when we are born, we begin to gather experiences like pebbles and stones. We slip each of these experiences into our pockets, filling them with what we have learned and done. This shapes us, this pull and tug of stones and pebbles. It is the accumulation of the weight of our lives. At one point, we reach an age where we have the urge to take these stones out of our pockets and begin sharing them with the people around us. Here, we say, look at what I learned! Look at how I have put these three pebbles together and seen something remarkable. We can be as hungry to share these stones as we were to gather them. If we are lucky and we live our entire lifespan, then this means we live until our pockets are empty. We no longer have stones to share. That's when it is time to prepare to move on.

I don't know when the moment is that we shift from filling our pockets to emptying them. I don't believe it is linear, some line in the middle that says here you fill and then on this side, you empty. The middle space feels much blurrier than that, with a mix of filling and emptying happening in various ways. I am further on the side of emptying than I was ten or even five years ago. If I am lucky, along with the privileges that support me, I still have a lot more years. But being toward the end of middle age, I feel an increase in the desire to tumble more and more of these stones out of my pockets.

The feeling is like this: here, this is what I have learned. This is what it felt like and smelled like. Is this useful to you? Is this a stone you want to add to your own pile?

This book exists because adrienne maree brown, who I already know and trust from shared work and community, read my blog posts and invited me to gather them together and rework them. I am grateful for that. Deeply. I trust her and what she listens for. It took me a little less than two years to feel ready to move with this invitation, two years of waiting and doing my own listening. And now, here we are.

These pages are literally some of the stones that have been gaining weight and nuance in my pockets. I'm pulling them out to share. You get to decide, obviously, if there is any use in them. I won't be insulted if there isn't, more

grateful that you know the difference between your yes and your no. In addition to that, I am going to reflect on things that might be directly about you and your people. I talk in this book about histories and present moments of violence and about their impact. Sometimes I talk about my own people and sometimes I talk about people with whom I am in relationship but with whom I don't share experience. They might be your people and your experiences. My goal with this book is that no one feels disregarded, dismissed, or made invisible. That's a big part of healing, isn't it? To know that when you speak or are spoken to, you are still here, vibrant and complex, rather than being disappeared by someone's ignorance or dismissal.

If there is any impact from the reading that adds to some of the burdens your people already carry, know that I am here to listen. If this burden is dumped on you, however unintentionally, please know that I am available to be in relationship to it. You can reach me through my website, [www.susanraffo.com](http://www.susanraffo.com), and I will respond.

This is not an invitation for those of you with dominant identities who do not like how I talk about whiteness and different kinds of social protection. That is not what I mean by "burden."

There are generations of relationship betrayal between so many of our people: within kin groups and between kin groups. There are also generations of relationship and care. I care deeply about transforming that betrayal and harm into connection and respect. I care deeply about coming back into kinship with each other as well as with our other-than-human kin. If nothing else, that's what this book hopes to support.

Robin Wall Kimmerer talks about the process of kinning, of becoming kin to each other.<sup>1</sup> That these relationships are verbs. That we verb each other. As Octavia Butler says, god is change.<sup>2</sup>

So, hello. These days I go by either Susan or Raffo. When someone calls me Raffo, there is a different kind of tug and purr that I feel. Our name, Raffo, is, as far as we can tell, an old Hebrew name that means "the wretched" and was given to people who worked with those who were in deep pain. I am not Jewish, although that is also some of my way-back ancestry. I like the feeling of she and her as pronouns but am comfortable with others. I was born in 1963, so I will be almost sixty when this book is first published.

I am going to name the people I come from but I want to hold care in my heart for every one of you who don't have this kind of information about your own people, whether because they were forced here or you were raised without relationship to family or any other reason.

My people, my ancestors of blood and bone, mostly come from the other side of the Atlantic, in particular Italy, Germany, Ireland, and France.

Through my maternal line, we are also Native with some memory and family story but not enough to root us into tribe and relatives. It has been at least four generations since we passed fully into whiteness. For quite a while, I was confused about how to name or not name all of my different peoples. I have been deeply shaped by whiteness and the assimilation pattern that works for light-skinned people. I have all the benefits of being white. The majority of my family lines are European folks of Christian lineage who are uninvited settlers on this land and the patterns that are strongest in me are Catholic patterns with Italian and German overlays. Some of my people, French ones, were among the first to bring their cultural violence to these lands in and around what is now called Quebec. Most came much later. Disappearance is the strategy of this colonial state and I refuse to let the genocide win by denying my Native great-great-grandparents, but at the same time, I have been raised within and most shaped by settler cultures and expectations. A dear Lakota friend first challenged me to this, to name all of my people and not leave any of them out. I would have known how to do it without her.

None of this is about identity precisely, something to hold tightly in my closed hands. It is about experience, about identity as collective, cultural, and historical rather than individual. This is where I exhale and relax the fullest. My individual identities often confuse me unless I know who they are connected with. The people I know and who shape me during this lifetime as well as our ancestors, my ancestors, both human and other-than-human, are the ones who fuel purpose and connect me, connect us, to both history and present. The simplest way I can articulate my purpose is this: I wish to work toward a world where no one is forced to leave behind their people, their land, their language and culture, in order to keep their children, their vulnerable ones, and their elders safe. I wish to attend to the impact of when this forced leaving has happened, both as an organizer and as a body-based practitioner.

When our cottonwood kin grow into each other, the branches of one tree touching the branch of another tree, they merge to become one branch. It's quite amazing. Each time I see it, my eyes trace the branch that starts on one tree to where it merges with the other. There is no linear origin story but instead, two different beginnings and then a joining that is both. The trees look like they have their arms around each other, holding each other steady. Cottonwood trees have shallow roots. Their ancestors have taught them how to best survive the unsettled ground of flood plains. When the lands flood and the soil is waterlogged, the trees' mutual support enables them to lean on each other. They redistribute their weight from one to the other, and this branch-breadth helps them shift and move with the moving soil without falling over.

I live a queer life in a mostly queer community with one of those deeply queer networks of people who have raised children together, a weave of lovers and ex-lovers continually challenging the idea of closed and private family. I identify as a woman, a word that I delight in, that feels spiritual and physical but not guarded and protected. My feeling of woman might not be the same as yours, and that doesn't stop either of us from claiming that word. Within that word, my gender expression has danced between all kinds of things. I have been with someone for twenty-six years, a Brazilian butch named Rocki, and I still giggle about it. I was not one of those people planning for a long-term relationship.

And I am Midwestern born and raised and landed, from the east side on the traditional homelands of the Erie to the west side on the traditional homelands of the Dakota. Being Midwestern matters to me.

My work has been deeply impacted by the framework of *healing justice*. I write about it elsewhere in this book, but my life was truly transformed when, as a newly trained craniosacral therapist, I entered the healing justice practice space at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007. This deeply shifted how I understand the work of healing. In particular, meeting Cara Page and others with the Kindred Healing Justice Collective, and then continuing to meet others who were and are engaged in supporting how care and change work come together, is the energy that makes this particular book possible. As I was working on this book, I spent time talking with Cara and with Erica Woodland. They are working on a book, a primer on healing justice, called *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the*

*Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety.* It will be coming out in early 2023 from North Atlantic Books and will be the core text of this tradition.<sup>3</sup>

I have been blessed to be in years of relationship, learning, and growth with the people who created this framework. I am proud of our work. It is important to recognize that healing justice was named by Black feminists in the South who were in relationship to many other people and movements. This book can only sit as one of many circles emanating from that powerful origin and center.

This is a book about wounds and connection, about remembering and repair. There are many ways to listen to the times and shapes before violence, numbness, and a disregard for the connection of life determined how we sit in community together. The land itself is full of these stories. Stone and tree and turtle and frog are much older than us humans. They remember how to adapt without losing connection, each to the other. There are stories held in cultural spaces and passed along, from one generation to the next. Whether or not they are the ones held in our lineage, we can listen to them respectfully. Not claim them or attempt to rewrite or own them, but listen to those who offer to share.

The physical body, this place of individual original home, is another place of story. It's a connected story, individualized by the boundary of its skin but also connected, deeply, from before birth until after death. Everything about the rhythm of the body, its pace of development, its way of holding pain and experiencing pleasure, is a story of relationship. Even the ways the body forgets and isolates, separating and numbing from those around, is a collective strategy. It's one designed for a body among bodies, not a body isolated from all. This community of cells, of membrane and fluid, of expansion and contraction carries so many whisperings and teachings of the before.

I get equally elated/dizzy/happy when learning about how photosynthesis works as about digestion. Anatomy feels gleeful, and the connection between blood and craniosacral fluid feels like a sacred text. And underneath this wonder are always the questions: what must be remembered, what must be repaired, what will reconnect?

There is nothing new about the culture of fear. It is, across thousands of years, the most effective way to control a people. Fear is both about

concrete experiences and the worry about what might take place. It is easy to inflame and harder, once inflamed, to settle. Fear rarely settles with a rational response, however brilliant.

Fear is of the body. It is an activation that is desperate to feel safe again. It is not possible to deal with the culture of fear without attending to the physical truth of fear. After all, fear is a hormonal response, a series of ancestrally-derived squirts, nerve firings, and muscle tightening. Once it gets going, the body can't easily discern between something happening in the present moment versus something that might happen someday, however unlikely. I once had a teacher, I am sad I can't remember who, ask us to notice the next time that we are frightened or worried about a possible outcome and to then notice on the other side of that outcome if it was as bad as we thought it would be. He asked us to notice if we could remember how afraid and/or worried we were. There are two things he said would be true—and he was right. The first is that the majority of the time, our fear is far worse than what actually happens. The second is that, once that fear settles, we don't really remember it unless it is inflamed again. This is similar to labor, the physical truth of giving birth to an infant. An intense all-consuming experience of sensation and emotion, so much pain, which you can't re-feel on the other side and often barely remember. Did you know that the oldest root of the word *fear* means "to try, to risk?"

So this book is just a series of stones offered out; of musings and wonderings about all of these things. And it's about a book about healing or transformation or change, whichever word feels best to you. There are four sections: Setting the Conversation, Stopping the Violence, Coming into the Present Moment, and Creating the Conditions that Allow Deep Healing. The opening six essays of the book are what I consider the foundation for any conversation about bodies: what it means to begin with the land, ableism and bodies, the original wounds of the land where I live and where they come from, and why learning and talking about anatomy matters. The pieces in the subsequent sections are, in some way, responding to or unpacking one of the elements from that first introductory section.

Two projects I refer to in this book are where I do my organizing right now, where I get to be in practice with real people in real time, loving and struggling in real ways. One is the Healing Histories Project (HHP), a project I have been part of dreaming and building for over eleven years,

founded alongside Cara Page and Anjali Taneja and now held by Cara and me.<sup>4</sup> HPP tells the story of the impact of eugenic strategies on developing care structures in the U.S. In particular, we look at the five hundred plus years of moments when bodies, particularly Black, Indigenous, queer, disabled, poor, immigrant, queer, trans, and others, have been used for experimentation or disrespected and completely discarded.

The other is Relationships Evolving Possibilities or REP. Based in the Twin Cities, we are a Black-led and Black-visioned network of dedicated abolitionists showing up to support others in moments of crisis or urgency, with care and respect for the full dignity and autonomy of the people in crisis.<sup>5</sup> We are guided by our core values: Black love and liberation, ancestral knowledge, and radical consent. We came together in the weeks after George Floyd was murdered, amid uprising and profound and deep connection. Many of us who make up the core of REP have been in different kinds of political and cultural relationships for over 20 years.

REP and HHP deeply shape my present moment. They are two of the stones I have been gathering into my pockets. They are what I do and risk as a way of fighting back against the evolution of fear, both mine and ours.

And the title of this book? *Liberated to the Bone*? Bones are our movement infrastructure. They are in the center of some parts of our bodies (hello arms and legs) and they protect the center of other parts (hello rib cage and pelvis and skull). Bones are not dried brittle things, the way they look when we see them after they have died. Bones are elastic, responding to the push and pull of fascia and fluid. They are mineralized, meaning they carry stardust in its original form, these bits and pieces of magnesium and chromium and more. While every part of our body is built from the land, meaning food and sunlight and water, our bones are constantly recycled parts of the land, bits of crystal and stone that keep recirculating from one body to the next.

Being liberated to the bone means not only being liberated to the center, to the place of holding, protection, and structure, but also liberated across time, to the beginning places, the moments when all children and elders were safe, and even before then, to the time when the stars exhaled, releasing the smallest parts of themselves to float through space, eventually landing as the seeds that nourished life, on this land, now and also back and forth across time.

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1. Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Nature Needs a New Pronoun: To Stop the Age of Extinction, Let’s Start by Ditching ‘It,’” *Yes! magazine*, March 30, 2015, [yesmagazine.org/issue/together-earth/2015/03/30/alternative-grammar-a-new-language-of-kinship](http://yesmagazine.org/issue/together-earth/2015/03/30/alternative-grammar-a-new-language-of-kinship).
  2. Octavia Butler writes her way through what it means to say “god is change” in many of her books starting in the *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019).
  3. To learn more about the deeply important moment in history that was the first US Social Forum in Atlanta, see the website of the Kindred Healing Justice Collective. They are at [kindredsouthernhjcollective.org](http://kindredsouthernhjcollective.org). *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety* by Cara and Erica is coming out in early 2023 through North Atlantic Books. I contributed a chapter on healing justice in the Midwest.
  4. Learn more about the Healing Histories Project at [healinghistoriesproject.org](http://healinghistoriesproject.org).
  5. REP for MN can be found at [reformn.org](http://reformn.org).

# Setting the Conversation

# IT STARTS WITH THE LAND

What does it mean to do healing work, to do any kind of change work when the land below your feet still carries stories that are not finished?

I am going to practice a storytelling here, one made up of things I have been directly taught and things I have learned on my own. I take full responsibility for anything I have misstated or misunderstood.

For at least fifty thousand years, two thousand generations or more, people lived on this land that is under my feet.<sup>1</sup> You can't see where I am sitting and if you, too, are sitting on this land mass that got called North America, then you, too, are living where two thousand generations of people lived. Real people. Complex people. People who were loving and mean, who laughed and who got overly dramatic. People lived here before the glaciers came and after. Stories of these people are passed down, grandparent to grandchild, stories of big storms and solar flares and time passing. Some of these stories are gone, scooped out along with water from the slough, ghosts that scattered along with topsoil, settling in the cracks between here and there.

I live on the unceded homelands of the Oceti Šakowinj. My home is about three miles from the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, Bdote, the beginning place of the Dakota people.<sup>2</sup>

Two thousand generations of real people lived here, and they did many things but there is one thing they did not do: they did not forget their relationship to the land and all living things in relation to that land. This is why they could live here for two thousand generations, in a land that was wild even as it was known, was loved even as it was farmed.

Twenty generations ago is when the first settlers arrived on these lands between the Minnesota and the Mississippi, bringing with them the separation that they had already learned on the lands where they began. They brought their understandings of private property and land ownership, and they began to settle. This is the first wound perpetrated on this land: the colonization by people and their ideology of ownership. Wound is what the Greek word “trauma” means. A harm that is tangible, that changes what happens afterward. This is the first wound: the violent attempt to separate

land and people, land and life, this attempted genocide of the original peoples, the attempted genocide of all life that lives on this land.

I work and live in south Minneapolis. Dakota people hunted and their children played right where the pavement runs through filled-in wetlands and open meadow. Their families were here in 1500 when French trappers first portaged and then river-wandered from the northern lakes to the southern prairie and oak savannah.

*I am not going to do this alone. If you are reading this, I want to know: Do you know the people who walked the land where you live for generations before you bought your house, planted your garden, and put out your recycling bins? What does it mean to become this knowing, not to gather information about traditional peoples as more objects to keep in your pockets, pulling out when appropriate, but to change you, to change your sense of relationship and repair to the land that nourishes you, witnesses you. What does it mean for all of us to become this knowing?*

The first European settlers to this land were French trappers who wandered rivers and lakes, making business deals with original people. After them came the army, first wave of the surge that would take trees, furs, and ore including, someday, oil from pipelines. The army came and over time drove the Dakota villagers who lived along the riverbanks further away. There was resistance; there is always resistance, even in the face of guns and disease. Some Dakota people settled along Bde Maka Ska, with a small farm where Lakewood Cemetery is today. Here is where Chief Cloudman lived and where some of the first Christian missionaries also set up, working to enforce Western language and cultural traditions and to break the cultural link the Dakota people have with the land. When you look at very old maps, there is a trail that goes from Bdote to Bde Maka Ska and it passes very near to where my home now stands.

By the time the French and then the army came, there would have been squatters where our street corner now is; Europeans who came and just put up a tent, a shack, a rough house. So many of those early settlers were young people, just like young, white, U.S. travelers today. Children who came to have adventures they could tell back home, becoming adults who reminisced over long-ago adventures in parlors amid cigar smoke and business deals. Collecting stories like empty skulls. Some people came because they didn't fit in back home, because it wasn't safe anymore to be

back home, or because they felt the call deep inside for something that was wilder than cities and farms. Some became friends with people from local tribes and some did not. They hunted. They fished. Sometimes they farmed and then they died or else, when the city got bigger, they went further north and settled in whatever corner they could find. I think of them when I drive up to northern Minnesota and see the houses that are made of plywood and twine, the old white men with beards past their knees, who live by hunting and gathering, signs with pictures of guns posted along their fences.

Even as the first settlers began to establish St. Anthony and what would later become St. Paul, what is now Minneapolis remained (mostly) unsettled Dakota territory until 1851. Two thousand generations or more lived on this land and it is only seven generations since settlers overtook this Dakota territory. Seven generations since the Twin Cities went from being held by original peoples to being controlled by settlers.

How can you, I, we, read that and not fall to the ground? Driving down the highway, watching the plastic and metal and barbed wire scatter across the countryside, I have lived here for over thirty years and each year there are more developments where before there were fields and trees. The birch forests that are themselves a response to the clearcutting of ancient forests. If you are reading this and you live on the Atlantic coast, the Pacific coast, or in those lands first settled by the Spanish and French, then there have been more generations of European decimation. At the most, there have been maybe twenty generations of destruction, those greedy-eyed, Christian men, starting around 1500, brought crosses, and barrels for the spoils of their violent extraction. Twenty generations against at least two thousand. How can you not fall to the ground, feeling this speed of destruction, its pull and its demand?

Where I live, the treaties came soon after the army. Treaties are agreements between nations, like the free-trade agreements we have today, agreements as a tense compromise between the rich and greedy and the poor in need of work. Land gluttony. It happened fast, like a plague. Within a generation, the balance on this western side of the Mississippi tipped from mostly original peoples to those who were not. In 1862, the U.S. government passed the Homestead Act, “opening up” ceded land for settlement. That same year, Dakota families were hungry and had not received the food and supplies promised through treaty. This is living

memory, these are stories that I have heard Dakota people tell. Not long ago like some kind of myth, but yesterday. These are the memories of grandparents and their parents before. Young people, frustrated with weeks of promises and growing hunger, fought, protested, raged, and this became the Dakota War of 1862. President Lincoln sent in troops and, after the battles, the Dakota families remaining along the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers were removed, exiled—the uprooting of a people from their land, their history. Their surviving warriors, forty of them, were executed. But what mattered most to the settlers was that there was more land. So more settlers came, buying farms along the Minnesota River, the Mississippi River, the St. Croix, spreading and calling their families to come, then spreading further.

The original wound of this land is the violence of colonization and genocide; the belief that you can own land and disappear all life that gets in the way of taking the resources from that land you feel entitled to claim. This is a European Christian wound, one that is a response to England's own colonization as land ownership on that island happened first in response to the Norman Conquest of 1066. It matters in the shaping of the second wound that at the time of the Norman Conquest, between one-tenth and one-fifth of Britons were enslaved. This is the cycle of violence: those harmed by violence who, rather than reaching wide to heal, take on, as Audre Lorde put it, the master's tools, and become the ones who harm.<sup>3</sup> These are the histories that were brought, along with Bibles and farm equipment, to these lands.

The second original wound of this land is the movement from owning land to owning people, the turning of complex breathing human beings into objects to be bought and sold, to be traded as a commodity, to provide stolen labor. The institution of slavery is the second original wound perpetrated on this land. First perpetrated on the bodies of people indigenous to this land then later on the bodies of those stolen from their homelands in what-is-now-called Africa. It is tied to the creation of Christian empire, to the evolution of binary thinking within Christianity (good/evil), and to the then evolution of anti-Blackness as a justification for enslavement. Initially this was only a Christian project, an imperial belief that non-Christian bodies should and could be used to build God's empire. For many (horrific, painful, shameful) reasons, this Christian project began

to evolve, moving from wealth extraction as a religious strategy to a racial strategy, although never completely separating from its Christian origins. The Virginia Slave Codes and a range of other local laws began to define who was a slave (Africans) and who was not (indentured white English workers) and the “rights” of white people to own enslaved Africans. The law was clear: African-descended people could not own white people. This means that as capitalism was first being shaped in relationship to these colonized lands, the enslavement and control of African people—and then later, free Black people—was part of its origin story. Following the passing of these laws, the U.S. was shaped by generations of white people increasingly creating justifications and explanations for why this anti-Black violence was and is “natural.” For what became the nation-state of the U.S., there was no real “before” that was not about the violent control and ownership of life.

Owning land, owning bodies. All who live here are impacted by these two original wounds and their current violent shape: Indigenous disappearance and anti-Black racism. All who have come to this land as settlers, refugees, immigrants, and migrant workers share the experience of being raced: being force-woven into the structures and systems that are maintained to justify the continuation of those two original wounds. The original wounds are not the land. The land is the land. But the original wounds continue, showing up again and again and again.

*Where were your people between 1750 and 1850? Did they have sovereignty over their own lives? Were they owned or did they own? Do you know the stories of who you were for those years? Do you know specifics or only something general? What happens for you when you think about that time, about what you know or don't know? How close do you feel to your people? Seven generations, .0000001875 percent of the time that we have been evolving on this planet, .013 percent of the time since the last ice age crossed the land below our feet. What do you know about your people from just seven generations ago? Six generations ago? The time of your great-grandparent's great-grandparents.*

Trees cut down to make railroad ties. Swamps filled in. Banks and more banks opening and then closing as money changed white hands, exploded into wealth for some and disappeared overnight for others. The squatters were kicked out and now land was bought with legal paper. Irish carpenters

and tavern keepers, Swiss and Welsh laborers, German butchers and cigarmakers, English masons, and Scots bakers joined farmers from Germany, Canada, and older areas of the United States, wagonmakers from New York, hotelkeepers from Virginia, lawyers and merchants from Pennsylvania, millwrights from Ohio, ministers, teachers, and tailors from New England, and French-Canadian voyageurs and blacksmiths to spread over Minnesota including the neighborhood just outside my door. Not all who came were Europeans but the overwhelming waves of people, those were white folks moving their kin and their ways to cut down oaks and elm.

And the city grew. U.S. policy towards the original peoples of these lands became “Kill the Indian/Save the Man,” and boarding schools were set up. The children and grandchildren of those who lived along the river, who might have hunted where my home now stands, were removed from their families and sent to Christian schools to disappear. And the memories of those who recalled when there were more oak trees than people faded in the way that the stories of our great-grandparents become vague phrases without depth or feeling. And the city grew. Flour mills and lumberyards growing fat off the homesteading of the prairie and the cutting of the great north woods. The city almost tripled in size between 1900 and 1950—and now we are creeping into the memories of your grandparents and parents, stories those of you who grew up here might remember.

In 1910, all over the United States, “racial covenants” were legal instruments inserted into property deeds that prohibited people defined as “not Caucasian” from purchasing or inhabiting homes.<sup>4</sup> This happened all over the country and also right here in south Minneapolis. The list of excluded groups reflected the racial assumptions of developers, real estate professionals, and homeowners. A common covenant read, “[this property] shall not at any time be conveyed, mortgaged, or leased to any person or persons of Chinese, Japanese, Moorish, Turkish, Negro, Mongolian, or African blood or descent.” Penalties for anyone who tried to break these covenants was severe and included losing your home and any money you had put into the property. The demographics of south Minneapolis in 2022 are still laid out along these hundred-year-old expressions of legal segregation. Each economic development choice, when weighed against these racial covenants, defined the city, who lived in it, and therefore who had access to all the benefits of a livable city.

*Who in your family was alive in 1914, how many generations before your birth? Did they live in the U.S.? This was the time of eugenics in the United States, when people of color, the poor, folks with disabilities, and queers were being institutionalized, sterilized. Radio was new. Catholics were following Father Coughlin by the millions as he ladled up his version of sacred normalcy. This was the time of World War I and the beginning of the Great Migration. These were the times many of your family stories and memories come from. What did your grandparents or great-grandparents tell you about this time? How did it make you who you are today?*

This is around the same time when the Mexican community in south Minneapolis began to grow. Sugar beet companies in rural Minnesota began to recruit families to come up from Texas to work in the sugar beet fields. Some of the *betabeleros* returned to Texas during the winter months, but others stayed and built homes in the Cities. While the largest community lived in St. Paul, a smaller community lived near where I live today, just off Chicago Avenue and then further north to Nicollet Avenue. In the 1930s and 1950s, as the sugar beet industry began to wane and as economic controls after the Great Depression were put into place, many of these families were deported, both those who were undocumented and those who were legal residents. Just like today.

The Great Depression came and work disappeared. Frightened people were looking for scapegoats, just like today. In poorer neighborhoods in Minneapolis, unemployment was over 25 percent. In 1931, Minneapolis became known nationally for its food riots as neighbors broke into grocery stores, stealing food to feed each other.

*Economically this was an unstable time. What stories exist in your family from the Great Depression? Were your people here in the U.S.? Food and housing insecurity was at an all-time high. People gathered together in collectives and support systems, building mutual aid structures. They, we, also turned on each other, looking for someone to blame. Eugenics continued to gain national traction through its attempt to purify the nation, cleanse it of those people supposedly responsible for our problems. Around this time, 2,350 people were involuntarily sterilized in Minneapolis, most of them defined as “mentally ill” or “mentally deficient.” A disproportionate number of them were Native. Across the country, forced sterilization disproportionately impacted Black people, Latinx folks, Native folks. One*

*third of the women in Puerto Rico were forcibly sterilized between the 1910s and 1950s. How did your family fit into this story? What themes from this time are coming up again today? Why?*

The Minneapolis General Strike of 1934 ended in an uprising with the police opening fire on labor union organizers and protesters. Two were killed and sixty-seven injured. The strike closed down all transportation in Minneapolis and the state declared martial law. Many of the workers lived where I live and work right now. This was seven years before my mother was born, meaning it was just yesterday. I grew up hearing stories of the Great Depression and of the strikes from my great-grandparents and grandparents. This is recent history. This is yesterday.

In 1934, the Federal Housing Administration developed a system for classifying homes for home buyers based on their resale value. They were marked green for the most desirable and red for the least desirable. And thus, was redlining born, the newer version of racial covenants. At this time, race in Minneapolis was defined as native-born white, foreign-born white, and Black. Indigenous disappearance was already habit, an unspoken strategy of cultural genocide. In 1930 and 1940, Black families made up .9 percent of the population. If you pay attention to local politics, then you know how redlining impacted North Minneapolis. Funds dried up. Economic segregation became tied to racial segregation. And we have still not recovered from this history.

Right here, eight blocks from where I am writing on this laptop, is George Floyd Square. As you cross the square east to west, you enter the redlined zone. A few blocks down from the square, at 41st and 4th, was Mrs. Little's boarding house. Here is where Black families new to town stayed in order to figure out their next steps. The neighborhood surrounding Mrs. Little's boarding house was Minneapolis's Black Wall Street.

In the same year that redlining began, the Indian Reorganization Act was passed. The Act asserted that, in order to be recognized by the federal government, tribal communities had to organize themselves, not by their own traditions and cultures, but by a management system that made sense to the federal government. Those not tied to a tribal community through a reservation, as well as certain tribal communities that the federal government decided no longer existed, were subject to a policy of assimilation, moving Native peoples to urban areas for resettlement. Some

of the children and grandchildren of those living here on this land before settlers arrived were moved into federal housing in Chicago and Cleveland and Milwaukee—and also to south Minneapolis, back to their original lands but now as relocated persons within their own home.

*Did you grow up in an urban area? What do you know about your neighborhood in relation to redlining or the Indian Reorganization Act? Did you grow up in a rural area? What was the racial make-up of your community? Where did who live? Was there formal or informal segregation? Were there visible Indigenous people, indigenous to this land? Again, what did this all mean for your family? What did you not know because of these things?*

There is so much more history to learn, to share, about this land where I now live. There is the land where I was born, Cleveland, Ohio; the land of Tecumseh and the first pan-tribal resistance to the violence of settlement. There is the history of busing and civil rights, the history of hate crimes like the Duluth lynchings in Minnesota, the Black uprisings in the Hough neighborhood in Cleveland the year I was born and multiple times after. There are also so many stories of survival and resilience in all of these lands where we live and where we come from.

Plantain root. Dandelions. Some of the elms planted along the boulevards, German chamomile, pineapple weed, thistle, comfrey, all the kinds of clover, motherwort, mugwort, and mullein. The plants I just mentioned are medicinal plants. Carried over in the pockets of settlers who brought their pharmacy with them, seeds they spread in their gardens, which then escaped and became, like their sowers, transplants that crowded out what had been here before. This doesn't stop them from being medicinal. This doesn't stop them from being colonizers.

And here is the challenge in being healers on this land, people who are not original to this land. Here is why knowing these stories, these unfinished histories and how they shape the space of our practice and the people who come to see us, is part of our work. Your work as a healing practitioner can only go as far as you know—not just with your mind but your whole self—the complexity of stories and lives woven into and remembered by the ground that is here below your feet.

*It started with water and it ends with water. Minneapolis is a city that still draws its drinking water from Haha Wakpa, the great river in Dakota, from*

*Misi-zibii, great river in Ojibwe. This river that grows more polluted with fertilizers and silt, the detritus from fracking and mining, and the salt and weed killer used in the cities, all of this has gone into the river. It includes water we release and water we hold, what is left behind in our homes and in the gutters, settling through the layers below our feet. There are ghosts that walk our streets, right this second. As you take a deep breath and listen to the stories that you know and don't remember, do you know who you are and why you are here? Do you know what your life has been created for? Why are you on this page, hearing this story, and remembering?*

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1. For over five hundred years, there has been a cultural battle over when people first settled on Turtle Island. Western anthropology has most often taught that people arrived on these lands after crossing the land bridge between Russia and Alaska/Canada during the last ice age. Indigenous oral histories have longer memories than that. More and more Western anthropologists are moving toward alignment with Indigenous oral traditions and more and more physical evidence is showing up that validates Indigenous stories. For a recent and good book that combines Western science with Indigenous traditions, see Paulette Steeves, *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

2. For more on Bdote, beginning place of the Dakota people, go to [bdotememorymap.org](http://bdotememorymap.org).

3. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–114. For more on Cara Page and her other work, go to [carapage.co](http://carapage.co). For more on Erica Woodland, go to [ericawoodland.com](http://ericawoodland.com), or to the National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network at [nqttcn.com/en](http://nqttcn.com/en).

4. The Mapping Prejudice project at the University of Minnesota has good resources on “racial covenants.” See [mappingprejudice.umn.edu](http://mappingprejudice.umn.edu).

# WHAT I MEAN WHEN I SAY “HEALING JUSTICE”

*Before anything else, since this is an essay about how we heal alone and together. Please pause and take a second to notice who you are right now. I mean this seriously. Pause and really look and feel around you. How is your breath? How do you feel where you are sitting or standing? Have you taken a break from the computer recently? Stretch. Close your eyes and remember who you are. Put your hand on your heart and say hello. You are welcome here.*

When I walked into the Healing Justice space at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007, something in me let go.<sup>1</sup> This tightness I was carrying inside, this confusion about how healing work fit into movement building, sat up all alert and watchful and then, for the first time ever, found a nice quiet corner to curl up in and take a bloody nap.

It is not a coincidence that what kept me from becoming a bodyworker was that I felt it wasn’t frontline enough. It is not a coincidence that, once I started working as a bodyworker, I felt some amount of shame and embarrassment if someone asked me about my work, like admitting to craniosacral therapy was admitting that I had given up on revolution.

At this moment in time when movement spaces are full of healers and people wanting to become healers, it’s hard to remember the cold, belly-truth of this shame. And yet it was there: not only held in my body but also called out in political spaces. Remembering this is important. Because this internal and sometimes community policing is part of the very system that healing justice work seeks to transform. Even if I don’t feel that shame today, that same system is looking for other cracks it can move into, taking us off course from deep healing.

When I use the phrase “healing justice,” I am reflecting on how the systems we seek to change outside of our bodies are also carried within our bodies. I am recognizing that the systems of care in Western medicine that we depend on are also part of the systems of dominance and oppression that we want to transform. And finally, I recognize that those most impacted by

systems of dominance and empire building, specifically Indigenous, Black and Brown people, have culturally grounded systems of care and support that have been and are sometimes still being violently attacked, minimized and disappeared, and then repackaged and sold by people outside of those cultural traditions. “Healing justice” is more than healing that happens to people who care about justice.

Healing justice is a lens and not a movement or even a targeted strategy. Thinking of it as a lens is like thinking of healing justice as poetry rather than prose. The cells of the body communicate with us through poetry, through story, image, and metaphor. This is how we end up with a felt sense of something rather than only an intellectual understanding. This felt sense, this way of knowing from the body up, is how transformation takes place.

Having said that healing justice is a lens and that using a lens is more like poetry than prose, I use guide ropes to help me feel my way through spaces of not knowing, the necessary spaces where difference emerges. Guide ropes are like prayers. They’re the things I hold on to, that I repeat when I am scared or need help, that I savor in my mouth, listening to how they sound and to what echoes inside of me in response. I am using this language—physical language—because what I’m about to share has the chance of becoming just another task list. Something that creates strategy as a form of control rather than as a way of unearthing frozen movement. That would be the opposite of healing justice. That would be what happens when systems of dominance and supremacy get into the cracks.

*Take another moment and breathe here. Stop reading and look up from the book. Stretch your head and neck. Notice that you are alive.*

First guide rope: Held trauma is, by definition, a form of disconnection. It’s a place where the present moment of life in its fullness gets stopped and interwoven with an unfinished and painful history. Healing is about reconnection. Healing is about attending to our held histories and supporting them to integrate or release. This is where wisdom comes from. Wisdom is what you get on the other side of integrating hard things. My first guide rope is to remember that healing and reconnection are about connection of the self with the self, the self with community, and the self with land and spirit. Systems of dominance are completely successful when those three things are fully disconnected. That’s why colonizing forces first take away a people’s language, culture, and belief systems. The fact that

you are here and reading this means that you have maintained or deepened your connection in one of these spaces. Maybe you have a practice of being outside and feeling connection with oak or ocean. Maybe you have a spiritual practice. Or you do self-care. Or you have deep relationships with your kin. Notice what you have first. And then practice wanting—fiercely—the rest. This is about healing but it's also about healing justice because you can't do this alone. There are systems and histories that need to transform in order to support our broader reconnection.

*Pause here. Notice your breath. What is it doing right now? Do you feel fast inside? Slow? Can you feel your body or is it just your mind that is reading these words? What has come up inside you in response to reading this? Everything is information. Every time you take a second to listen within or to listen without, you are observing, noticing information. For now, there is no action to take. There is only observation.*

Second guide rope is not much different from the first. It's another window into the same house, another thing to hold onto that helps me ask questions about what I am doing. This guide rope is woven from three strands: stopping the violence, coming into the present moment, and creating the conditions that allow deep healing. This is also how I structured the sections of this book.

First, we stop violence. When violence is taking place, the body cannot settle into healing because it is focused primarily on survival. Stopping violence is literal and concrete: stopping police violence particularly linked with anti-Black racism, stopping the violence of poverty, stopping the violence of evictions and the truth of missing and murdered Indigenous women and of all forms of sexual violence including the murder of transwomen. Stopping the violence of deportations and too many families in prison. Stopping the violence of oil pipelines, stolen Indigenous land, and poisons that we breathe, drink, and eat. Stopping the violence of sexual and gender harassment and abuse, unchosen houselessness, targeted transchildren and adults. Stopping violence also means the violence carried inside, the hypervigilance that comes from being targeted, the anxiety and stress that result from brutal acts and the trauma of capitalism and isolation. Stopping violence includes intervening on any care system that denies the dignity and agency of the person receiving care. Healing justice is about first and always stopping violence.

After we stop violence, healing is about practices that help us come into the present moment. This practice, the second strand of my guide rope, is a constant act of remembering yourself, of claiming your own life. It stops the accumulation of a thousand small cuts that over time become congealed pain that needs deeper healing to shift. Coming in to the present moment is about remembering your traditions, your culture, the land you live on, the feeling of your heartbeat and breath, the stretchy strength of your muscles and fascia, and the vibratory power of your voice. It's a way of saying, in this moment, right now, I claim my own liberation. The Internet is overflowing with suggestions for how we do this, from tracking our breath and grounding our bodies to putting our face and hands in the dirt when it is nearby. Building collective power toward transformative change and letting ourselves feel the deeply physical pleasure of looking left and right and knowing we are not alone: this is also part of coming in to the present moment.

And finally, along with stopping violence and coming in to the present moment, we create the conditions that allow for deep healing, my third strand. Deep healing is what happens when we shift the histories that our bodies and communities hold. It happens when we are no longer defined by or experiencing ourselves through past disconnection, past violence, past betrayal, and disregard. Instead, we re-member our connection with ourselves, with our communities, with the land and spirit. Deep healing isn't something you schedule. It comes when it's time to come. Sometimes stopping the violence in a single moment can bring about deep healing. If you've never had someone protect your life before, when someone suddenly does, it can shift how history is held. A regular practice of coming to the present moment, of self- or collective care, can create the conditions for deep healing. It can happen that on the 378th day of doing a hip opener through yoga or of taking your morning walk—all the small particles come together and you are suddenly someplace different, awash in grief or joy, feeling the parts of yourself come together again. It can happen when, after the sixteenth time you start your meeting with prayer or movement or breathing together, you turn to conversation and are startled by the level of truth-telling and connection that seems to suddenly emerge where it had been absent. Creating the conditions for deep healing is about creating memorials where violence, recently or long ago, has taken place. It's about

storytelling, about reconnecting with traditions and your language. It's about asking questions, listening, and taking the felt-sense risk again and again to stretch into someplace where you haven't been before.

Each of these weave together: stopping the violence, coming in to the present moment, and creating the conditions to allow deep healing. They are each part of the other, but, if we don't hold them with intention, systems of supremacy may find the cracks to, one small bit at a time, bring us to a place where healing is about feeling better within our isolated bubbles rather than a fiercely felt connection with life. None of this should be a task list. It is poetry, an incantation you whisper to yourself as you are planning your day, organizing an action, sitting down with a group of people to dream or act together, showing up out of deep respect for someone else's pain, or claiming your own survival.

*Now breathe. What feels true for you? What doesn't? What is happening inside of you right this second? Is it fast or slow? Do you feel connected or alone? Hungry or tired? What emotions or sensations are you noticing? Be with this truth that is welling up inside of you. Be lightly curious, but don't go straight to interpreting anything. Instead, take a deep breath and then let go. And, now, here comes the rest of your life.*

Thank you, Kindred and Cara Page, for transforming my world.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For an explanation of what happened at the US Social Forum, see "Healing justice at the US Social Forum" on my website: [susanraffo.com/blog/healing-justice-at-the-us-social-forum-a-report-from-atlanta-detroit-and-beyond](http://susanraffo.com/blog/healing-justice-at-the-us-social-forum-a-report-from-atlanta-detroit-and-beyond). There's a link to a Portuguese version as well.

2. Kindred Healing Justice Collective is at [kindredsouthernhjcollective.org](http://kindredsouthernhjcollective.org). Cara Page's website is [carapage.co](http://carapage.co).

# HOW WE TALK ABOUT BODIES MATTERS

We didn't ask for it. We didn't create it, but it's true. Every time we talk about bodies and healing, we are in relationship to histories and beliefs about what is normal and what is not. These histories and beliefs carry invisible assumptions as heavy as gravity.

Many of our people had believed that their kin with different physical bodies or different ways of expressing or experiencing were evil or possessed by spirits, a danger to the community as a whole. Not all of our people believed this. Some saw those who were different as gifts, as beings in closer relationship to the sacred. But the European histories that first colonized this land and created the mainstream beliefs that define healthcare, religion, and politics were rife with torturing, killing, or separating those who were seen as physically, emotionally, or mentally different. I am writing about Eurocentrism, but Europeans were not the only ones to deal violently with difference. Please learn and know your own histories. Very few of us come from people who knew how to love radical difference, even before we were colonized.

As scientific ways of thinking began to define European culture in the 1800s, this added a new layer to defining the body. Now the sciences of anatomy, of medicine, of health and wellness began to define "normal" and "abnormal" and to create public policies for managing society along these lines. Who was defined as normal shifted over time but most often it included people with physical impairments, including cognitive differences, gender nonconforming people, those seen as delinquent or deviant or criminal, and those who are raced as not-white. Eugenics developed along with the theory of evolution as a respected science focused on creating the "perfect" race.

This history is not finished. The collective trauma of murdering our own kin because someone defines them as inferior is unfinished and shows up again and again in policies that define people as diseased and therefore not worthy of controlling their own life and its meaning. This history colors conversations about assisted suicide; racialized beliefs about who is more violent, smarter, or generous; how healthcare policies are defined and

healthcare expenses are treated; how accessibility to public and private spaces is supported or dismissed; the obsession with super-fit bodies, assumptions about gender and experience based on the genitalia or our perception of the body in front of us; the use of the words *crazy*, *insane*, or *foolish* to dismiss anyone you disagree with; the invisibility of mental health struggles; the assumption of a certain kind of neurotypical cognition; the physical, mental, and emotional assumptions made in movement spaces where liberatory political work demands long hours of physical and mental energy, including every space where people talk about healing.

I have heard many different healers use words like “whole” when referring to where someone’s body needs to be. I have heard many healers talk with community members about the outcomes of doing healing work: getting better, stronger, faster, like some sort of Superman. I struggle with this whenever I talk about healing—and usually try to only talk about trauma as disconnection and healing as connection, and to then be clear that what connection feels like is defined by the person who wants to heal and *not* by anyone else.

Eli Clare talks about much of this in his book, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*.<sup>1</sup> If you identify as a healer, healing practitioner, or any kind of care worker, read it. We must always assume that, even as we are doing powerful work to support someone, we are also re-entrenching a history of ableism that slips its way into every sentence you speak, every assumption you make. All trauma is collective and as people who care about healing justice, we don’t get to claim our own work as practitioners without directly attending to disability justice.

There is work to do. Deep work that deals directly with how histories of violence are held in the cells of the body. There is also deep work to do about thinking we know what transformation or liberation *must* look like. As healers we cannot decree what is normal or valuable and what is not. We cannot separate or rank the many different ways that a life experiences itself but rather allow that life to define for itself and within relationship to its chosen communities how it wants to define healing.

I make mistakes every single day. In the morning before I practice, I ask for help in showing up in the best way that honors the sovereignty of the individual and collective lives in front of me while also working to stop the histories that negatively impact their sense of possibility. As healing

practitioners or people committed to healing justice, let's spend the rest of our lives doing a better job of not getting in people's way because of the violent histories about wellness and bodies that inform the very practices that we use in support of their liberation.

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<sup>1</sup>. Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

# DEALING WITH THE ORIGINAL WOUNDS

*This is not a trigger warning, but it is an invitation that you pay attention to yourself. I am going to talk about the violence that is the foundation of the creation of the United States. It is easy to read history and turn it into information: something that a person “knows” and “understands.” Please don’t do that. Everything written here is about real people, people like you and your kin. In the story I tell, your kin may be committing the violence or suffering it. Either way, notice yourself as you read. Listen deeply, listen to how your ancestors might whisper to you through your DNA, through your spirit. Read this as a prayer, not a school lesson. And then breathe.*

I just finished taking a walk along the Mississippi River. The leaves are mostly fallen, the sumac is bright red, and the ancient cottonwoods loom large along the riverside. I usually walk near Coldwater Spring, a sacred Dakota site that has been taken over and domesticated by the Park Service, and along the river just north of Fort Snelling. I never go there without remembering where I am and what happened at that place. I never go there without remembering that eight generations ago, there was no Fort and this was only Dakota land. I never go there without remembering the sixteen hundred Dakota families who were interred at the Fort after and during the Dakota War, only six generations ago. I go there and remember the expulsion of the Dakota people from their homelands, still six generations ago, all of these actions taken by President Lincoln within months of his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>1</sup>

As a bodyworker who studies craniosacral therapy and learns from other modalities, I know that if you can identify the original wound, the first significant hurt, and if you can support that original wound to get what it needs to transform, then many of the things that happened afterward will transform at the same time. I have seen that kind of unwinding, moments of deep healing, within the cells and tissues of people who invite me to be with them. Held trauma is a moment of unfinished history. Life wants to come back to the present moment, to feeling connected to other life. This means that held trauma will find a way to resurface again and again until it is

finished. This is why some people seem to get involved with the same kind of abusive person, the same boss or work situation, the same feeling of isolation and sadness. Until we can heal or shift the original conditioning, we will get trapped in the same tangles.

The same is true of what happens to the collective body.

In the first chapter of this book, “It Starts with the Land,” I said that, for those of us who live on this particular land, there are two significant original wounds that lay beneath our histories.

Again, the first wound is the attempted genocide of those people indigenous to this land. Europeans brought their wounds from across the ocean and planted them here. Those wounds included a sense of disconnection from land and the idea of its ownership; idea of profit, impossible without inequality; rigid and specific gender assumptions that subjugated anything seen as feminine; and a patriarchal and transcendent God who expected harsh discipline and service from his followers. These wounds had evolved in Western Europe for thousands of years.

Of course, in their European homelands, people were (and are still) fighting for a connected life that does not depend on violent inequality at its base. Many of those who first crossed the ocean came here because they wanted to find a place where they could live more spiritually grounded, simple lives. But even those who came seeking heaven on earth brought their wounds. They carried it like a virus as they attempted the unceasing disappearance of the original people of this land through murder, forced assimilation, land theft, and cultural policing.

The second original wound, as I’ve said, came soon after first. Just as the land became an object to be sold for personal profit and use, human beings were turned into commodities for the same purpose. The second wound is the institution of slavery, the economic system that depended on the creation of race as a way to organize the complexity of life. This second wound is entwined with the first; both together creating the foundation of the United States: Indigenous disappearance and the violent policing of anti-Black racism.

When you attend to an original wound, you increase the potential for transformation.

There are many other wounds that exist on these lands: gender oppression, classism, ableism, religious persecution, anti-immigrant hatred, and all

kinds of phobias. But they are not the original wounds of this land. Most flavors of U.S.-based class and gender oppression have European roots, not Indigenous, Asian, or African cultural roots. Forms of gender- and class-based oppression might well exist in those lands, but upon settling here, in the United States, those other inequalities merged with the European form of cultural divide.

The one thing all of us share who are living on this land that is now called the United States is the experience of being raced. This is true whether we are new immigrants or our people have been here since first contact. This is also true for those who are indigenous to this land but it doesn't quite work the same way. Being native to this land exists before race and so identities like Lakota or Ojibwe or Cree are cultural experiences that existed before they were raced. Being raced means having the complexity of your history, your culture, and your understanding of yourself and your kin aligned with a category that you have no power to shift. The only people who get to move into adulthood and experience life without the awareness of being raced are white people, even as white people are as raced as everyone else.

White supremacy, I believe, is a system of coddling European-descended people so that they, so that we, don't have to feel the impact of the wounds our people brought with us over the ocean and then transplanted directly and indirectly into this land and into people's bodies. White supremacy is a system set up to maintain these original wounds so that they are raw and bleeding, never able to heal, and then transform into something new. White supremacy exists so that European-descended people don't have to experience the profound contradiction between the life they are leading and the values they claim to hold.

Healing justice is about directly addressing these original wounds. Period. This means healing justice seeks to stop the violence of these histories as they show up in the present day, including in how newer immigrants are defined through the lens of anti-Black racism and anti-Indigeneity or through whatever racially supremacist twist U.S. global economic interests add to the mix.

As healers and healing practitioners, we work most of the time with individual bodies. Life shows up in healing spaces in very local ways: as an experience of pain, emotion, disconnection, compromised movement, or energy. We are there in response to how the truth of someone's life shows

up in any given moment. This is healing. What makes it healing *justice* is how we hold the truth of the present moment within the larger context of the original wounds.

Paying attention to the original wounds of anti-Blackness and Indigenous genocide does not mean ignoring the real pain of gender, class, and all other forms of oppression and violence. But it does mean still and always paying attention to the original wounds. There is no gender or class liberation possible on this land without attending to the original wounds. Without attending to and healing the origins, other fights will eventually become aligned one way or another with white supremacy. It matters deeply that profound class divisions, sexual violence, and rigid gender binaries did not exist on this land prior to colonization. They are not native to this land. They were brought here and transplanted, just like a Monsanto seed, fighting its way into the reproductive cells of native seeds as they are transformed against their will.

*Beneath all this is the foundational hurt: the one that these histories made possible and maintain. Beneath all of this is our separation from the life that sustains us. This land, right here, below our feet. The kin who are within arm's and heart's reach. How we experience the connection of all things, spirit, life. And the ancientness of our selves, our ancestors joining hands along our DNA. Notice your breath. Right now.*

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1. For a Dakota reflection of the Dakota-U.S. War, see [bdotememorymap.org](http://bdotememorymap.org). This site includes a range of books and articles to read on the war as well as on many other aspects of Dakota history and tradition. For another piece looking at the Lincoln who sought to disappear Indigenous people while also moving the Emancipation Proclamation forward, see Tony Tekaroniake Evans (Kahnawake Mohawk), “Abraham Lincoln’s Uneasy Relationship with Native Americans,” History Channel website, [history.com/news/abraham-lincoln-native-americans](http://history.com/news/abraham-lincoln-native-americans).

# WHY LEARNING ANATOMY MATTERS

Here is how it should be: we are born and, as we grow older, we learn ways to talk about and experience what is happening within our skin as well as what is happening outside of us. Education, we all know, should support us to experience life. This means supporting us to be in deep relationship with our first and original homes: our physical bodies and the communities of life that are their shape and swirl.

Contrary to what it says at the top of the page, learning anatomy doesn't matter. Learning the Latin names or a textbook's idea of the correct placement of the duodenum or the third cervical vertebrae doesn't matter. Learning anatomy as poetry, as history, as cultural understanding of physical tissue, that's what matters. Learning anatomy as a way to *be* the first gathering place of the intestines (duodenum) or to feel/know/understand the throb and shape of a headache that rides low at the back of your head (third cervical nerve and so much more), that's what matters. Learning anatomy is not about assigning facts to parts but about sensing in and becoming that anatomy. It's about experiencing our own lives in a place of nuance and detail, completely and always connected.

Learning anatomy is, at its core, about learning about difference rather than standardization. As with communities, there are some things you can say that are likely to be true about the collective of cells called a human body, but this likeliness does not mean that there is a normal or an average body. Such a thing doesn't exist. Hearts are not all in the same place in the chest cavity, nerves do not act or move or attach in the exact same way in every body, and let me tell you: organs migrate. Ask any person who spends time looking at the inside of a human body; they will tell you that anatomy is a map that helps give you a sense of the general layout, but when you go looking, things are often not where or how you thought they would be. It's why I like to call anatomy poetry rather than fact: it evokes something that then helps us to understand what we are experiencing.

It's important to think of anatomy as poetry rather than steady fact. It's important to the path of liberation and to honoring the sovereignty of individual bodies to have their own experience of themselves. There have

been and continue to be entire social and economic systems, medical practices and eugenic practices, deeply racialized and gendered and ableist ways of approaching the body, that focus on identifying which kind of body is “normal.” Across history and in the present moment, horrific things have been done to bodies defined as not “normal” to bring them “back” under control. Systems of definition, like race, gender, and often health, have been created to distinguish between normal and different, and then to attach meaning (and violence) to that difference. How we talk about—and experience, connect with, care about, live in, and attend to—bodies matters.

This thing we call anatomy, this wealth of information cataloged on the page, this compilation of drawings, recordings, and objects floating in formaldehyde, evolved out of a mix of slow observation and violent attack. In the U.S., the so-called “father of modern gynecology,” J. Marion Sims, forced his research on the bodies of enslaved Black women, building a compendium of “knowledge” about gynecology that is still taught with rarely any awareness of (or repair and healing around) where that knowledge originated.<sup>1</sup> There are stories like this throughout the history and development of anatomy as a science.

Still, it is important to learn anatomy, its poetry and flow, the violence and pain of its history, the liberation possible in its sharing. It is important to learn a story of connection that does not single-out the heatedness of the sympathetic nervous system without also talking about its relationships to everything complex and marvelous within us—and to the histories outside us that helped to give it its name. It is important to learn, to become, connection to the cellular experience that is our life.

These bodies are our original homes. Our beginning place. They are also our ending place and our place in between. They are what we have and who we are. Keeping them a disconnected mystery is what trauma, oppression, and the conditioning that numbs and freezes us depends on.

The poetry of anatomy is just one way to pay attention. There is no single story that tells the truth of this community of cells self-organizing within our skin. Chinese medicine has a completely different story about what goes on inside. So does the yogic tradition, and aboriginal traditions, and Yoruba traditions, and on and on. What gets called Western anatomy is an evolved and emerged set of stories and understandings that is, in comparison with all of these other stories and understandings, wiser in some places and more

awkward in others. What we call the science of anatomy emerged first, as far as we know, in north Africa, particularly in Egypt, about 3,700 years ago. Because there was wisdom in it, this way of talking about the physical body began then mixing with cultural traditions and understandings in Greece, and then flowed back and forth among Islamic, Christian, and Jewish thinkers and dreamers, poets and scientists, until becoming this thing that we recognize today. This evolution of illumination, of excitement and learning, should also be part of its teaching, alongside the violence and disregard that has flourished through its development. Like a whole body, this is a whole story. And it is only one story, one way of assigning meaning to shapes and spaces around and within us.

We have been here all, before and beyond every story: pumping blood, swirling lymph, laughing and crying and experiencing *all* kinds of pleasure.

I get dizzy and feel weepy when someone tells me the story of some aspect of the body. Embryological development makes me shaky, in a good way—like some love-buzz drug welling up from those ancestral, evolutionary spaces, echoes of long ago that are still here, just like our vestigial tails and early tadpole-in-the-uterus moments.

I dream about teaching an anatomy class one day, about teaching it as ceremony and respect, as a conversation about remembering and also about coming home through poetry and practice. I dream about teaching an anatomy class that doesn't limit itself to the boundaries of the human shape but instead shares in a way that says: look at how our noses are like and different from the noses of wolves. Look at how the mitochondria in our cells and the chloroplasts in plants have the same grandparents. Can you feel it? Can you feel how we all remember each other?

It's what we can tell our youngest when they are new-body discovering themselves and the world around them. This, this body is part of your magic! Go ahead and be it, feel it, know it. It's your home, your glorious and original home that helps you feel/be/know that the specificity that is you is no more a separated from the whole than your liver or fingernail is from you.

This, after all, is the ultimate wisdom that our body shares with us: we can be two things at the same time, completely specific and unique as well as, seamlessly, the inhale and exhale of a greater connected breath that is the rhythm of life itself.

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1. Deidre Cooper Owens, *Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

# Stopping the Violence

# LESSONS FROM THE BODY: TO PROTECT OR TO GROW

In the beginning was the cell. This is how everyone started, simply as a dividing cell. There is a lot of magic in the beginning of life. The fact of life itself involves the randomness of which egg and which sperm finally fuse. Out of that tiny moment of penetration comes cheekbones and a dry sense of humor, or countless other things. In our life's earliest stage, there is a thick sticky fluid that is somewhat like egg whites left out on the kitchen counter for a few hours. This is the cellular membrane. It is very thin. Scientists could not see it until the 1950s, when a microscope was built that was powerful enough to see something this small.

There would be no life without this membrane. You would not exist. This membrane is what keeps any group of molecules together and in a single place. It's not a single layer, but two layers with a space in the middle. The cellular membrane is why you have a shape, a body that moves. It's why you aren't just sea water puddling on the ground. The cellular membrane is the boundary that keeps everything that doesn't belong, whether it is harmful or wrong or just plain confusing, on the outside. It releases waste and it lets nourishment in. It's smart, this cellular membrane. It stores energy, it maintains fuel supplies. It vibrates. It communicates. It decides who and what is coming through, and when. When I say "decides," I mean that the cellular membrane has a kind of memory, an ability to recognize that which is supportive of life and that which causes harm. It also recognizes its own people: heart cells recognize heart cells, liver cells recognize liver cells. This recognition happens at the membrane. This is intelligence.

Evolution. First we had the brilliance of a single-celled organism, an individual, and that was all we had for billions of years. We don't know why it appeared, maybe it was aliens, maybe something divine—for all we know, Adam and Eve were two, individual cells bumping up against each other. These single cells floated or swam, drifted and dreamed throughout the water that was the earth. According to this story, the earth itself was

young and it took time for this single cell to begin to meet and merge with other cells, creating plant life that would exhale enough oxygen to coat this hard ball of rock with its own membrane, its atmosphere.

But evolution happens and complexity is cool, so eventually those single cells found out that you could move further and do more things if you join forces. We are stronger in community, so we became a multicellular organism, a body, like the one you are right now. Fifty-two trillion cells, over eight hundred times the number of people on this earth, all living together, figuring out this life thing so that we could continue, generation after generation. Life exploding, life receding, evolution happens just like that, and all because of the cellular membrane.

The cellular membrane is like the skin on our bodies. It's like the ozone layer around this planet. Here, at this membrane, we decide who we are and who we are not.

The cellular membrane is there to learn, which means to grow. Life exists to experience itself. As life experiences itself, it learns. The cellular membrane is also there to protect the cell. And here is the quandary: the cell cannot grow and protect at the same time. Protection for the cell means shutting down reception, shutting down the fluidity that allows learning. From the beginning, when that first singular cell bumbled its way to life in the warm ocean soup, protection has been designed to be temporary. Something you do in a moment, until the threat passes. It is not a state that is supposed to continue, a permanent way of being. There is no space for wisdom here if protection never ends. Growth is the forever part; it's what we call life. We cannot protect and grow at the same time.

Fifty-two trillion cells, that's how many of those single drifters have now merged together to make a single homo sapiens. All those cells living together, figuring out how to be alive so that we can continue, just like this, one generation after the next. Life exploding, life receding, evolution happens just like that, and all because of the choices made by that cellular membrane.

The cellular membrane shifts, opening and closing, a thousand small decisions that are about relationship and change. It cannot shut down because if the membrane shuts down, if it becomes a wall, then the cell will die. The cell will not be nourished. With only three seconds of oxygen at any given moment, if the membrane turns to a wall, the cell cannot breathe.

A cell in protective mode triggers all kinds of other things in the body, an immune system response that means the release of histamines and norepinephrine, fluid responses that feel to us like anxiety, like stress, like a racing heart, a dry mouth, skin tightened, eyes looking quickly from left to right. These are evolution's way of saying very loudly: we have to do something now because we are in danger! The protective mode is fast and is what helps us dart out of the way, push back, or fold our arms over our heart and prepare to die. Evolution gifted us with a simple system: to grow is life and, when we need to protect, it is supposed to be temporary until the danger is past. Once the danger is past, we grow again. This is wisdom.

Cellular membranes also get called cell walls. That's what most people call them. Walls do not allow growth: they only support protection.

Cell membranes are intelligent. They communicate, they store energy, and maintain fuel supplies. They are fluid things, able to let life move back and forth, to evolve and shift in response to how life shows up on either side. They are not walls, they are membranes. The membrane receives signals from the cell's environment, depending on which molecules attach themselves to its outer surface; it interprets the signals and tells the cell what to do. These signals are how we create ourselves through stress, nutrition, through our feelings and responses.

The intelligence that is here, in this cellular membrane, this very thin wall of fluid and fat, is where we decide who we are and who we are not. If a cellular membrane shuts down with protection for too long, the cell will die. It literally can't breathe. This is not something that most people choose. When this happens, it usually means something has taken place, an act of harm, an overwhelm by a person, by a virus, by bacteria. Shutting down this membrane, this wall, is not something that most people choose.

# WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BODY WHEN IT HATES AND WHY IT IS SO PLEASURABLE

This week has been, like too many other weeks, a week overflowing with hate. A friend of mine posted on social media about an act of violence they just experienced. They were vulnerable. Things had been difficult in their home. Their word choice on Facebook triggered two people who then spent a lot of time trying to knock this friend down. There was rage and hatred and all of the ways that people can use social media to say your life isn't worth anything.

It was a small thing in the scale of hatred, and it was close to home. There was more, this week, bigger. The day that I am writing this piece, there were shootings, stabbings, beatings, hate. A man went into a Hanukkah party in New York City and took a knife to five people, only the most recent example of the anti-Jewish assaults rising rapidly across the country.<sup>1</sup> Also today, a man went into a church in Texas, killing one person and injuring two.<sup>2</sup>

And today is the anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre; state-sanctioned violence focused on the destruction of the spiritual and cultural strength of the Lakota people.<sup>3</sup>

Hate, hatred, hate.

Before I write anything else, please pause. This is not just information. These are real people, real lives. They are not just examples for a case I want to build. There should not be a need for any further elaboration. The fact of this violence should be enough to ... to what? To end the violence that separates human complexity from the stories we tell about the people we don't know intimately? To end the violence of projection, which can take up arms and take over nations? And there is far more than what we see in headlines, or the stories that a few of us remember. There is the ongoing everyday violence of sexual assault, domestic violence, the fact of border camps. Real people. Real lives experiencing violence on this day across thousands of years.

When we feel hate, there is a part of us that lights right up. It expands,

glows. It's the same part of us that lights up when we feel love. Not all of the same, only one part of the same, of course. There are other things going on, other hormones that start dripping, when we feel hate versus love. But there are also some things that are the same, and that matters. It's right there, in the middle of your head, behind your eyes and halfway between the forehead and the back of the skull. The *putamen*, which for those of you who speak Spanish, probably makes you giggle. But this is scientific English-based-on-Latin, so let's get serious. It's the part of the brain that prepares the body for movement and for protective action. That's what hate shares with love.

When I learned this, I felt it. That clunk when two pieces fit together like they were looking for each other and let loose a sigh. Protective action. That is where hate and love come together, isn't it? A strange intense kind of longing. It's why racism and romanticism are two sides of the same coin: this deep engagement that says I want to be you / I want to be anything *but* you, flipping from one to the other based on context and conditions.

The difference between love and hate happens right behind your forehead. Love stops thought, really, the rational mind goes on holiday. And hate overthinks. The frontal cortex lights up and starts thinking-thinking-thinking, making stories, making connections, building a picture of how this person, these people, are somehow the reason, the deep and unbearable reason, why this life, this moment is not able to grow. Blame is assigned and there is hate.

Neurologists say that the brain patterns for hate bring together the oldest, most primitive part of our brains and weaves those patterns into the youngest. Survival at its primitive form is not interested in complexity. Hot/cold, hungry/sated, safe/dangerous: it's without nuance. Our youngest parts, they are all about the abstraction of connection and thought—story-making. Hate is something primal and ancient—you are a threat and I am terrified—that mixes with the story-making part of our brains, this recent part in the poetry of evolution.

The farthest back root for the word *hate* that we can find is the word for sorrow. That sentence is almost enough on its own.

Another old part of ourselves, old in the way of burrowing animals, has figured out that the way you prepare a safe nest is to push out anything uncomfortable: straw that is too pointy, rotting food. Anything that stinks or

hurts, you push it away. When it is gone, then our nest, our burrow, our most basic home is comfortable. And for our most ancient bodies, comfortable means safe.

And hate was born, something that emerged from sorrow. I am telling the story of the people who emerged alongside the English language, because that is the language I am writing on this page, and that is the culture hidden within the shifting of meaning over time. It's the language that colonized this land I live on, and it's the language that is pretty set on doing the same thing to the whole world. I already know that other languages tell this story differently. I know, for example, that there is no word for "hate" in Ojibwe. Not like it is meant in English, this single concept that implies an emotion that condemns, like a guillotine, like a border, the "us" on one side and the "them" on the other.

Hatred is personal. It is intimate. And like all intimacies, it feels good. Its roots, again, are engagement and connection—but the opposite of love, which is the connection that says I want to be closer to you, even slip beneath the boundaries and become you.

It doesn't matter who you are, the victor or the victim, every single one of us can find a way to justify our hatred and will probably spend a lot of time doing that. It feels good. The space that holds all the things we couldn't run from, fight against, overcome. We hate them.

The very hormone that most gives us pleasure, oxytocin, could well be the hormone that supports this feeling of hate. If I love you, I want to protect you, to make sure you are always going to be there. If you are a threat, you are about to take away what I love, this person, this ideology, this nation. Therefore, I am going to use all of that love juice to push you the hell away. I hate you, because you are a threat to the thing that brings me the most pleasure.

We have known since we were two years old that sometimes the easiest way to find our pleasure—yes is to begin with the clarity of our repulsion—no. Hatred is intimate. It is deeply physical and concrete. Pushing away, pushing away. It is the physical feeling; I can't just set a boundary that says I am here and you are there; I have to police that boundary and make sure you never ever get in.

That takes a lot of energy. Most of us get over our fights and arguments and annoyances pretty quickly. We actually just forget about them. It takes

will and teaching to keep a fight going; to keep anger aflame long enough to actually become a generalized hatred, of a *type* of person, of an entire nation. It takes a lot of energy and discipline to hate. As I said earlier, it takes a lot of thinking. Much more thinking than it takes to feel the timelessness of love.

As John Mohawk teaches, culture is a community's collective agreement on the best way to survive.<sup>4</sup> If hatred thrives it is because we believe our children will be safest if they can hate, too.

Talking about hatred, by the way, is not the same thing as talking about justice. I don't have to hate you to know that there is massive repair that needs to happen. I also don't have to love you.

I am embarrassed by how many words it has taken to get to what Buddhism, as I understand it, has been saying for thousands of years: we are shaped by the things we feel aversion toward.

It feels good to hate. It actually feels good. It has its own kind of energy, its own sense of connection, of purpose, of story. It can unite people around a common enemy. It can take away the uncomfortable awfulness of having to look at myself and how I have created or co-created this horrible situation we are in. It's all tied up with the pleasure drug because usually, hate goes along with something wonderful and visionary that we want to protect. It is, beyond any shadow of a doubt, one of the sacred tools of nation-building. We are glorious and awesome because we are not, heaven forbid, them.

Hatred comes from sorrow, buried in the roots of the word so far back that the newest seedlings have no memory of it.

A friend of mine, Qui Alexander once shared with me an adaptation of an Audre Lorde quote that he uses with his students: Who wears the mask of your fear? And here is another root, another seed that sprouts into hate.

Today is the anniversary of the hatred of this nation, the deep generational sorrow of a group of English colonizers who long ago lost a sense of their own history and connection to their land—so many of their own colonizations ago—who then hoisted that sorrow across generations into hatred and felt no compunction about destroying the spiritual and cultural practices of another people. Hatred, like love, has been generation-bred into the bodies of those light skinned ones who are walking the road to destruction. They are unable to do the deep-earth work of diving under

hatred to find grief. It is right there, just waiting, grief that is both shame and despair, that says we have lost so much, we have hurt. The piled up sharpness and rot in our burrow can't be pushed away. It won't go away. We can only make someone else hold it.

Hatred is a form of connection; something that shapes identity, that organizes how we teach our children. Hatred carries sorrow and hides it, secreting it away in basements and attics, until we forget that it is there. Hatred is not the same as anger. It is not the same as justice. And it is not the same as love, even though sometimes it feels pretty close.

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1. On Saturday night, December 28, 2019, the seventh night of Hanukkah, a masked man wielding a large knife or machete invaded the home of a Hasidic rabbi in Monsey, Rockland County, New York, where a Hanukkah party was underway, and began stabbing the guests. This murder is referred to as the Monsey Hanukkah stabbing.

2. The West Freeway Church of Christ shooting happened on December 29, 2019.

3. Patti Jo King, "The Truth about the Wounded Knee Massacre," *Indian Country Today*, Dec 30, 2016 (and updated September 13, 2018), [indiancountrytoday.com/archive/the-truth-about-the-wounded-knee-massacre](http://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/the-truth-about-the-wounded-knee-massacre).

4. John Mohwak, Sotsisowah (Haudenosaunee) died on December 12, 2006. He is the author of many books and has numerous videos and podcasts easily findable online. This quote comes from a presentation he gave on April 18, 2006 entitled, "'Discovering' the US: Haudenosaunee Influences on U.S. Culture and Democracy." The talk was part of a year-long educational series on "Onondaga Land Rights and Our Common Future."

# THE OVERWHELMING ARC OF VIOLENCE

Before moving on, let's pause here. We are talking about ending violence as the first step in healing. Ending violence.

There is so much harm happening, even as you read this sentence. I spent time on the phone with a beloved who was grieving the hundreds of women whose bodies are stolen from Juarez every year. Earlier in the week I was talking with a beloved whose cousin has gone missing and her fear that her cousin might be the most recent statistic in the generational violence of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Which violence most touches your heart? Which has most touched your life or the life of your people? Which one is most likely to bring you to your knees? What do you generally ignore or feel nothing about? Where are you numb?

Talking about violence is dangerous because it can push the impact of this violence to a distance. Make it seem like a “subject” as opposed to something that bruises, body and land.

A family member asked me to be the person to sort through her paperwork after she has passed or if she is no longer able to make her own decisions. She is unmarried and without children, although many of us see her as an elder we love and are responsible for. We drove to a small town in Iowa to meet with the person who manages her retirement account. He spent some time showing me her investments and the like. She is by no means wealthy. She is a middle-class white woman who worked her whole life during a time when working for the state meant you had pensions and support. Her money is, and was, tied up in all of the things that create fake cash out of real cash because of how it is invested.

I sat in this office in a small town in Iowa and felt, in a tearing, anguished way, just how exhaustingly rooted capitalism is. I sat there, feeling the small towns and cities, the rural areas and suburbs, across the U.S., filled with people investing their small sums. This is a web of violence: the privatization of survival. Public safety nets and generational mutual-aid networks have unraveled, particularly for those with access to cash. I am not talking about the super wealthy, protecting money that has accrued

across generations. I am talking about regular people who are trying to save money so that, one day, they can rest.

This financial investment system makes it possible for companies to build stronger, better rubber bullets, tear gas canisters, gas and oil pipeline schemes, prisons and detention centers, data mining, and every aspect of technology used for stealing lands, fighting wars, and plotting harm. Socially responsible investing might take some of the edge off, but the underbelly of investment is not sustainable. Like applying intensive fertilizer to the earth, it creates unnatural profit that harms future generations.

There is violence woven into every privatized household and marketed as the responsible way to take care of ourselves and those we love. Not everyone has retirement accounts or other forms of investments, but about 75 percent of Americans have something, even if it isn't enough to keep them safe when they can no longer work.

When focusing on healing and wellness, safety and care should not be an override, a way of sidestepping the truth of violence in order to stay "positive." Healing is not just what happens when we receive some form of care, sing with our people, or share food and medicine. It touches everything.

Many years ago, I listened to an interviewer ask Joanna Macy how she continues fighting without giving up hope? Joanna Macy is a ninety-something, radical, white, Buddhist, cisgender woman who has been involved in change work unceasingly her whole life. She responded that she never gives up hope, but she also doesn't pretend that things aren't hopeless. The challenge, she shared, is to hold two things at the same time, without contradiction. In one hand, hold the unflinching truth of violence and harm, both historical and in the present moment. Hold the scale of it and be alive to the fact that this violence might expand and win, tearing us apart even further. Don't minimize it. Don't soften it. Don't generalize it away from the truth of how you and your people might have created or benefited from it. Feel it and know it as one possible truth. And live with what comes up when you do that. If you aren't already, let yourself be intimate with the truth that we might not make it.

In the other hand, hold the absolute truth that transformation is possible. Hold and feel what is beautiful about life, what is glorious, surprising,

ancient, and new about the depth of connection that is possible. Hold love, and struggle as part of love. Let yourself be filled with this. Live with what comes up when you do it. Don't be held back with the limits of your imagination. Dream and vision fiercely, radically. If you aren't already, let yourself be intimate with the truth that change is possible; that our descendants might well already be sitting together, sharing food and telling stories of the terrible times that ended.

The challenge is to then sit with both hands, one filled with horror and loss, the other filled with love and intimate connection, and feel them both at the same time. Don't let them cancel one another out. Let the contradiction be. This, Macy said, is what we need to get to the other side. This is what I understand Alexis Pauline Gumbs and others to mean when they remind us that our descendants are already living the lives that we are working hard to imagine.

As healers, organizers, care workers, and those committed to change, our work is to hold horror and transformation in our own hands and in support of the people we are connected with. The first part of healing is ending violence and part of that, at its deepest level, is acknowledging violence, its impact on us, and our role in perpetuating it. It means acknowledging violence in all its forms, from the most overt to the ways it is subtly woven into our daily lives. And it also means remembering that deep love and connection is always here, surviving every attempt to wipe it out.

# EMBODYING IMPACT

I am long interested in impact. I am interested in the ways our lives are always connected, in the ways we experience this, and in the different ways we experience the softening pleasure of connection and/or the abrasiveness of rubbing together. We are all connected which means we always impact each other.

In its oldest English usage, the word “impact” literally means “to fix or fasten upon or into.”<sup>1</sup> Notice that this is neutral. It is simply two things coming together. By the 1600s, a time when most English speakers were involved with a rapidly expanding empire, when the majority of people living in Britain were living in poverty and the rich were getting richer through stealing land and bodies and whatever else they could find, the word “impact” started to mean “to press closely into something *or to strike against.*” This is no longer neutral. Now there isn’t only a fix or a fasten but pressure or force. There is a striking against a boundary between not two equals but as, potentially, a power struggle, a power over. And the power struggle intensifies until, by the early 1900s, the word begins to mean something very specific: “to strike forcefully against something, to have a forceful effect on.”

But there are all kinds of ways of talking about impact. Stories of being depressed or overwhelmed. Stories of how it feels when someone calls you out of the blue and loves you awake again. Or the impact of the wildness of the world around us, even when it is only visible as a dandelion hoisting itself through a crack in the cement. The impact of seeing and knowing children, of elders who remember your name and tell you stories that help you remember you are part of a people. The impact of food cooked with love, of an exhale after years of lung tightness, of what love feels like when we let it burn its way through us, one cell at a time. All this is impact as well.

There is impact with violence, there is impact with pleasure, and then there is what happens after that impact, the echoes that carry forward.

Every system of oppression and supremacy, every moment where someone chooses to rage their entitlement or rage their despair, every

educational curriculum that teaches hate and categorization rather than love and connection has a relationship with the moments before it. The wound of Western progressivism—this idea that the future can be better stronger faster without being in relationship to the past—is a great cultural and collective override, as though each of us were a superhero, able to leap over the past and present to get to some unattached future.

Pause for a moment and notice what is happening inside you as you read these words. What is their impact? Notice what wells up, from the depths of those fifty-two trillion cells that is your physical/energetic self. Noticing might mean anything: a temperature, a sensation like buzzing or numbness, a movement or stillness, a memory flash, a desire to move, an emotion that feels like yours or an emotion directed at me. And underneath it all, as you hear my words, do you notice a leaning forward, a pulling back, or a hovering between?

Here is the practice: to notice what arises and then to pause before interpreting and giving it meaning. What has fixed or fastened upon you? A stirring inside or nothing at all? Just let yourself notice the impact and then wait.

Did you feel, yes, I can do what Susan is asking me. Or did you feel, no, I won't, I'll just read over that part, this is silly, I don't want to do any of these practices. Or maybe there is something else, a suspension—maybe I will, maybe I won't. I'll wait until I get more information and then I'll decide. Suspension as stillness and grounded quiet, waiting or suspension as a vibrating bracing, waiting to see where this all leads.

Somatics and embodiment support each and every one of us to feel and know, in the deepest upwelling part of ourselves, the clarity of our own aliveness saying yes and saying no. Not the shoulds and musts that come from conditioning or fear. Instead the upwelling truth of your aliveness saying yes or no, this internal sense that is there, even when systems and situations outside say the opposite. This is the root of understanding and working on impact: our ability to feel the physical, energetic, living truth of yes, of no, of wait-and-see.

Now pause again. How is your aliveness right now?

Each act of violence, no matter how massive the impact, is made up of thousands of actions and inactions. These impacts unfold in the present moment and reach back to generations past. Actions of people exactly like

you and like me, like the people you hate and the people you love, making choices or feeling they had no choice. Each of these actions and inactions layers up, like sediment, loose and gravelly at first until, over time, with enough pressure, that sediment turns to cement, to rock that feels like bedrock as though nothing else was underneath.

We are here to find, deepen, and create cracks in the congealed thickness of generations of harm, generations of impact that started as violence and then, over time, became normalized, held in our bodies as internalized oppression and internalized supremacy. We are here to notice where life managed to remain, veins of connection snaking through the cement.

Addressing impact at the largest scale is where we join together to build collective power. Belonging to something bigger than yourself, something life-giving can be a form of healing, particularly if it connects you to others around you, makes you attentive to something bigger, a bigger connection yet. Building collective power to change law and policy, to surround a group of kin to keep them safe, to join together so that we have other ways of loving those in crisis that doesn't depend on calling the police, those are big cracks.

And then there are scores of smaller cracks, the choices we make or don't make in the present moment, the arcing expansion toward connection and love and telling the truth rather than the habitual contraction that says I am not safe, even if there is nothing dangerous taking place at all.

I name Marcie Rendon as a teacher.<sup>2</sup> She is Ojibwe and tells a story about something she has only ever experienced in Native spaces. Before coming together to do something collectively—whether that is making a plan, responding to an act of violence, organizing a celebration—the first thing that folks do in the room is to attend the harm that exists between them. Here is how I have gotten in the way of your liberation. Here is how my acts have impacted you: the intensity of my breakup, the way I have left my children, my hyperfocus on my job, my drinking or using, my hiding in my own home, my steamrolling this conversation, my grief, my rage. I know that I impact you. Marcie says that time must be spent before anything can happen, time to be together with our impacts, to talk and fight and cry and get stuck and be with them until enough of *something* has passed to allow the people in the room to turn, together, toward this thing we are about to do.

“Enough” doesn’t mean all better. It just means enough connection and repair for a “we” to emerge and move forward, together. And this takes all the time it needs to take because there is no moving together until enough of that sense of we, of readiness, is in place.

Ignoring the repairs needed between us means getting in the way of the possibilities in front of us.

It is likely that you have never experienced this. Or maybe you have once or twice, but not, I would guess, as an assumed practice. Imagine what it would be like if you did this practice, with your family, your kin, your friends, your neighbors. Imagine if we took that time. Imagine if each of us knew, all the way through us, that this time is more important and necessary than anything else.

Notice what is happening with you right now. Do you lean toward this story, toward what you can imagine? Do you pull away? Do you sit neutral and still or braced and waiting there in the middle? What do you notice?

A few years ago, I heard Malidoma Somé tell a story.<sup>3</sup> In my remembering of it, he was reflecting on Indigeneity and he said something like this: Westerners or nonIndigenous people get very confused about Indigeneity. They carry this idea that being Indigenous is about living in balance with all life, all of the time. He was laughing while he described how nonIndigenous people romanticize Indigeneity as a state of perfect connection. Of course this isn’t true. He said that Indigenous people, like all people, misunderstand each other, intentionally and unintentionally cause harm, have bad days. Things get out of balance. The difference is that being Indigenous means that you know the reason you are here is to attend to relationships. Most of our time, he said, is spent attending to imbalance among people, between people and other living beings, between all of the different ways that one life, human and not, impacts, and is impacted by, another. Being Indigenous, explained Malidoma Somé, is about taking relationships and impact seriously and giving the time needed to help balance re-emerge. And this is an ongoing process: the balance is here and felt, something happens, there is impact, and things go out of balance, and we realign again.

Lying in bed this morning, I was awake but not ready to get up. For a short time, everything felt exactly right. The sound of my partner breathing, her warm body, the soft feeling of the sheets, the gray winter light, that

muted feeling when it has recently snowed and the air still holds that heaviness. It was enough. Just exactly enough. And then my mind started doing its thing, waking up, planning, and thinking until I could feel that separateness come back in, muscles and neurons all clicking together toward the doing rather than that unexpected brief moment of connection.

I have a friend who is very good at holding that moment. We sit in a group that opens each meeting with song and sometimes, after we have sung together, there is that suspension again, the echoes of sound still in the air, deepening the silence. She sits there, savoring it, being with it, while, after the end of the song, my mind starts spinning toward the next one.

This is the practice, the waiting. Allowing the suspension, the deepening. It's the reason why the first step in healing is ending violence. There can be no calm suspension, no deep waiting, when the body must shield itself from active or echoed violence. There is bracing and protection. There has to be, as we deal with impacts, from the massive and generational to the small and personal, as we lead them away from striking with force to the spaciousness of fastening and fixing.

We are all connected. Everything we do has an impact. What you do for your own self-care has impact on those around you. This doesn't contradict your need for it, it just connects your need to the need of others. Western science is slowly remembering these things: whether we are oak or swallow, dolphin or elephant, or human, we are all connected and we are born with the capacity to feel that connection, whether we are raised to savor and appreciate it or to be afraid of it.

We have impact. We cause harm. We are impacted. We are harmed. There is trauma piled up and there is the new hurt that landed today. Healing and organizing are about repair and reconnection. We do this so that life can experience itself. It is why we are here.

Impact can be stunningly illuminating. According to Nell Painter in her book *The History of White People*, in the early eleventh century, approximately one-tenth of the entire population of what is now called Great Britain was enslaved, rising to one-fifth in the West Country.<sup>4</sup> Enslavement was a deeply embedded part of the British economy and the British Catholic Church. To this day the British national anthem includes a line that says Britons will never again be enslaved. Violence enacted, violence that has impact without the space and time to heal from that

impact, often gives birth to a cycle of violence. It's what our individual bodies do. It's what our collective bodies do. Held trauma, individually and collectively, always wants to complete itself. It finds ways to reassert, to recreate the conditions needed for its healing to begin, and, when there is no reconnection and repair, it tries again, and again. The abused becomes the abuser or the abused is no longer able to protect those it loves from neglect or abuse, or just to allow the creative chaos of life expressed to go without tightness and control.

Turtle Island, which became known as the United States, was first colonized by the descendants of those English and Scottish and Irish slaves.

For many of us, there is shame around knowing we have caused harm. Shame is a contraction, a moving away from connection, a survival strategy that is there for a reason. Shame is not always toxic. It's one of the ways we balance out our sense of care and compassion. I do not think it is bad for a child or an adult to feel shame for having caused harm to another person. It's how we notice that we have contradicted our own values. What is supposed to happen, of course, is that we have the space and time for reconnection and repair to take place. This brings us back in relationship with the one we have harmed. Toxic shame is something different. This is the shame that is carried deep within. This shame says that there is something inherently wrong with you; something so bad that you don't deserve love. This is what happens to shame when it is left to fester and deepen or when it is supported by the systems and teachings around you. You are poor? It is your fault. You are in prison? It is your fault. You are being beaten? It is your fault.

So many of us struggle with an inability to acknowledge the impact we have on each other, from a place of dignity and truth, with being able to say, yes, this happened, this is happening. I did this. My people did this. I know many organizers and activists, people deeply committed to ending racism and transphobia and ableism, who still shy away from the truth of their individual and kin-based violence. If I were to guess, I would say that half of all projects working to change the impact of historical violence are built like bridges over this uncomfortable truth, skipping over it by focusing on the destination

Embodying impact is different from grieving such truths, although it can include this. It is also different from feeling anger or rage about those

truths, although it can include this. Embodying impact is about being in the middle of your own life, your own dignity, your own complexity and saying without the intensity of an emotional response: Yes. This I have done, this I have not done, this fastening, this fixing turned forceful. I see it. I admit it. I know it. And I am still connected to you, right now, you who I or my people have harmed. I am still here with you. I have not left. I have not become lost in the intensity of my own emotional needs. This is what I, we have done. This is what I, we did not do.

And then you wait, within this space of connection and truth. You wait for the clarity of action that comes out of connection. You don't fix, solve, or soothe. The harmed themselves or their descendants when they are ready, might say something to you. Maybe they never will. Maybe they will, but it won't be to you.

This is the hard thing. To deeply acknowledge the impact and then to stay in the middle space, not leaning away from it to minimize it, not pressing forward to try and control what happens next, but staying in the middle, waiting and connected.

For those of you who, like me, were raised Catholic this is not what we have been blood-taught to do. My Catholic conditioning is much more transactional around harm and repair. Tell the truth to God or his intercessor, the priest, and then get your punishment: five Hail Marys and a dozen Our Fathers. Once you have done your prayerful duty, the slate is wiped clean and you are ready to sin again.

Even if you are not raised Catholic, this transactional nature of harm and repair is still embedded in Christian culture. If you apologize for harm you have caused, part of the unspoken contract is that the person you are apologizing to is supposed to forgive you. An apology is supposed to "make it all better." The culture that shaped me focuses much more on how hard it is to apologize than on the true impact of the harm that was caused. Or, the focus can go in the other direction: the fact of the harm becomes so hardened and crystalized that nothing will ever address its impact. The one who apologizes is the penitent on their knees, offering their life, their dignity, their ability to judge their own worth to the harmed person. I have more often been this person than the one who expects easy absolution.

At the root of every system of oppression and domination is relationship betrayal; generations and generations of relationship betrayal. Relationship

betrayal is what happens when there has been harmful impact—in the violent sense of the word—and that impact has been ignored, minimized, or distorted by the dominator, often as their own pain. All of these things take away the space for the person or community that has experienced the impact to determine how, if, when, or why they respond.

Notice what is happening inside you, how you are feeling, what your aliveness is showing you, right in this moment.

What is your list of impacts waiting to be addressed? How many of them are ready now, but you are avoiding or rushing them? How many are not ready to be held close? Which impacts are about your direct actions and which are about your people?

Stay with it. Suspended. Listening. What are the sensations that are coming up right now? Just listen and notice. What feels unfinished? And now, if you know, what is your next most elegant step?

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1. For the linguistic history of words, I refer to etymonline.com and etymologeek.com.
2. To explore Marcie's books and other materials, visit her website at marcierendon.com.
3. To see a listing of Malidoma Somé's teachings, go to malidoma.com. His reflection on Indigeneity comes from the book *Of Water and Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).
4. Nell Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

# HELPING WHITE MEN LOSE CONTROL

*For the most part, this essay is about cismen. For those who don't know this term, "cis" stands for cisgender, which is a term for people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. So "cismen" are people who were named as boys when they were born, largely because they have penises, and who identify as men as adults. Some of the experiences I describe are shared by people with a range of other gendered identities, other ways of being shaped by toxic masculinity. For my own comfort with language and for the point I want to make, I move between referring to cisgender and just naming the identity as "men."*

There have been a few times in my practice when I have spent ninety minutes with a straight white cisman, supporting him to learn how to physically, emotionally, and mentally let go of his control and his power. This means helping him to experience shifting some very early conditioning, to take the "stuff" of power and control and physically hand it to another person, in this case me. I am not talking about control over any particular thing. These are not organizational or political moments. This is about something deeply felt; something within a body that wants to shift and heal.

One man in particular had come to do work on his relationships. He wanted to know why, no matter how hard he tried, his partners didn't fully trust him. As with many of the white folks with class privilege I work with, his first practice was to learn how to feel his own body. After all, if you can't hear the impact of life on you, then you have a hard time hearing the impact of your life on others. This man got this part fairly quickly, could feel an increase and decrease in his respiration, a shifting in expansion and contraction within his body. After that, we started to listen to how his body was responding to what his partners were saying. Each time he got close to anything that was difficult, uncomfortable, or confusing, he immediately self-settled.

Now, self-settling or self-regulation is our birthright. It's our ability to bring our own nervous system down when we are overwhelmed. It's what

self-care supports. Self-settling can be, like all things, both a tool and a weapon. Self-settling, in this case, is when the person you are sitting with suddenly, in the midst of pain or chaos, is okay. Not okay in a grounded, connected way, deeply *with* you and what is happening, but okay in their little, self-enclosed island. You can feel them leave you and when you reach out, attempt to connect, they act as though nothing has changed. Because for them, nothing has. Unconscious self-settling is one of the ways that different forms of supremacy are conditioned into bodies: the ability to leave a relationship and retreat into a separated isolated self without actually feeling a sense of disconnection. It's that moment when the person is saying, "I'm fine over here, all good. The skies are blue, why are you still so upset?" Meanwhile, the world is burning all around them and you are starting to smolder.

This separation into an isolated self, of course, is what trauma does. It is a moment of disconnection when the mind actually wants connection, but feels as though there is no other option. I deeply believe that raising babies to become white, male, or other dominant-culture adults who isolate in this way is a form of developmental trauma. It's an attachment disorder, a disconnection from unhealed generational wounds, all the way back to the original wounds on this land, which means a deep and generational form of disconnection.

I write those sentences carefully. While dominance starts with a kind of developmental betrayal, supremacy then orders the world around itself to make sure that nothing can ever contradict, harm, or just plain get onto the other side of that separating wall. By ordering the world, I mean using forms of violence, control, minimization, and disappearance to keep those with power safe and protected from anything that might be, well, uncomfortable. This ordering and controlling the world is not trauma; it is domination. And it seems normal. Think of our educational systems, prison systems, media representation, the expectations of the so-called American Dream, gender roles, beauty standards, and so on. The early attachment betrayal that creates supremacy is a contradiction: it's a tool and a weapon at the same time.

Before writing this piece I had three different practitioners reach out to me to discuss how the hell you work with ciswhite men. These practitioners were not ciswhite men. They were not all white, although they were all

bodyworkers. They were talking about men who voluntarily showed up wanting something different; cisgender men who want to get to the other side of this thing that the people they trust are calling out in them. They admit to having no idea what to do or how to get there. Each also, in some way, frustratingly named that they can't see what is being pointed out, but they trust the people doing the pointing. There's humility here. That matters.

I don't know what it's like to be raised as a boy. I don't know what it's like to have the specific hormonal, physiological, and cultural experience that most often shows up in people defined as male. Since first writing this piece, I have met many different cisgender men who are able to help other cismen unpack power. I know there are an increasing number of men able to hold this slow work of moving through conditioning and disconnection to healing and repair. Some of them, a few, are able to hold and address toxic masculinity across a range of bodies perceived to be male. I trust the ones who are clear that they are in the midst of doing their own unpacking as well. At the same time, I know that men are coming to women and nonbinary folks asking for help. Because that is also part of the conditioning. Because these are the only people who might touch this hunger for something different.

Sometimes when I work with men, getting them to let go of control means, for a moment, becoming a sort of boot-camp sergeant: getting in their face and actually pushing hard until they let go. The first time I did this, I felt off center. This is not what a bodyworker does. We listen and support the body itself to find its own way. But here was someone who deeply wanted to lose control and had no idea of how to do it; no sense of what to listen to inside, what clues to follow. They were not vulnerable or overwhelmed. Because of their early conditioning, which our culture protects, they didn't know *how* to be overwhelmed. So I got close. And pushed and yelled—and there it was, a raw wounded place that did not immediately close up and hide away. These men felt. A lot. It was huge and overwhelming and lasted for about three minutes before it all shut down again.

And when it shut down, things were not the same.

"Oh, that's what you have been talking about!" one said. "That was awful and wonderful and then it went away."

I have a few friends who are dominatrixes. They have told me that this is a big part of their business: helping men to get to this place where they are not in control. They have others who want the same thing—ciswomen, trans and nonbinary folks—but it's cismen who almost to a person want some version of this experience of giving up control. “They need help,” said a friend, “to figure out how to cry like a baby and not keep worrying if they are really allowed to do this.” “They need help,” another said, “to get past the security and warning systems embedded inside that won’t let them even notice when the vulnerability is there.”

There has been a fair amount of research over the last few years on the effect that power has on the brain. The studies all name a similar thing: significant individual power or significant individual success numbs out a part of our neurochemistry called mirroring. Mirroring is, for most bodies, the basis of compassion. It’s the way we learn things as small children without ever directly being “taught” them. Mirroring is the nervous system’s way of saying: I am you, you are me. Having power at a large scale can actually turn off mirroring; it separates the individual from the pack. This, in turn, impacts the neocortex, the right hemisphere of the brain, and the body as a whole. Because identity and culture emerge out of experience, the longer that this impact is unchallenged, the more normal it feels. And once something feels “normal,” the body will fight to maintain that normality by bringing the survival system on line when “normal” feels threatened. Thus dominance hijacks the body and the body’s sense of its own survival. These bodies then go on to raise children.

What works to shift this disconnection? Remembering, and not just as information but as a felt sense, an experience of feeling powerless. For those of you reading this who have never had to search for a feeling of powerlessness, I know this can raise a few eyebrows. Powerlessness happens to many of us all the time when we are profiled by systems and institutions, but it’s more than that. Most of us don’t remember our earliest feelings of powerlessness. This is particularly true if we were raised by parents who believed that we should cry it out alone in our rooms when we were seeking comfort or if we had other early childhood experiences of not being attuned to by adults there to protect us. I am not equating racial profiling with being left alone in your room when you are eight months old, though there are similarities. Because for the body, the feeling of

helplessness, of being out of control, is the same. What is not the same is the kind of institutional resources and histories focused on maintaining or forcing control over bodies based on race, gender, class, and so on, no matter their age and the contexts and conditions they face. What is not the same is how those early childhood feelings of powerlessness are then either reinforced or covered up by our experiences as adults.

You can imagine these as layers, with our adult minds generally tracking on the experiences of powerlessness we have felt as adults and having a harder time remembering or sensing in to what we felt when we were very small. For most, but not all, white men—hello beloved white male kin who have experienced all kinds of abuse—it takes some time to find that feeling of powerlessness in your bodies. But here's the thing: it's there. It is always there. The reason you don't understand the feelings of vulnerability your beloveds are trying to share with you is that your early experiences of powerlessness have been cemented over. Without that sealing up and shutting down, your heart would be open and you would track with compassion, even when you did not agree.

It can sometimes take a while to get beneath the layers so that these memories can come through, but they always do. They aren't necessarily clear memories, but show up as emotion and sensation more than image and understanding. By bringing this feeling into the body and staying with it, really sensing into it and body-remembering what it was like, those numbed out systems begin to come back on line. If we don't do this—directly and sometimes agitatorially—then change is unlikely. There is absolutely no reason for privileged bodies to change, except to come closer to connected aliveness. To live in alignment with our own values. But the body's survival responses don't particularly care about that. They care about survival on their own terms.

With this work, a sense of connection to others begins to tendril out to the surrounding world. A glimmer of mirroring returns. This is not a one-time thing. To shift this more deeply, to transform, you must do this work again and again. If you are someone with social dominance, like a white man, and you do this power shifting in a healing space, you build capacity for feeling these things within that healing space. If you don't make changes in the outside world, then that outside world is going to reshape you, bring you back to the shape you are most used to being, the shape of control. Your

mind will do all kinds of clever things, telling you how different you are as a result of what you did in that healing space. And some things will be different, but the difference will not be as big as you think. You will become someone who lets go of control in protected spaces but who maintains control in the rest of your life. Transformation is an all or nothing deal.

This is similar to any healing work done around the isolation of held trauma, but again, the early betrayal and harm of supremacy conditioning is a different thing. This can all feel like a very big mindfuck: is it trauma? Is it supremacy? What word do we have for when supremacy hijacks the survival responses and uses held trauma from scores of generations ago to keep itself fed and thriving?

Here is the ultimate contradiction, the place where politics and healing crash against each other. Politically you beloved white men are centered by systems of supremacy, cultural conditioning, and your own internal sense of entitlement. Your work is to uncenter yourself, to move you to the margins as part of the process of creating a space where something else can emerge. Politically, culturally, in relation to other people, your work is to emerge back into the collective without assuming you are the automatic head.

While I am talking about ciswhite men, I am really gathering every one of us with a dominant identity. I am talking about everyone who has been protected from feeling the harm of our own actions, who has been told that this thing about us—our race or gender or class or region or religion or body shape and size—means that we deserve some things that others do not deserve. If we have been taught it, there is some part of us that believes it, regardless of what we tell ourselves. In moments of stress and confusion, those beliefs will show up and shape the moment. Politically, those dominant identities have to uncenter; stay in the background for a while, maybe generations, so that the whole connected glory of us can reshape and reorient. Personally something else has to happen. Dominant identities are usually stories wrapped around empty space. Acknowledging the empty space feels like dying so the dominant identities create stories and cultural practices, external things to grasp so that the inside self doesn't collapse. We build a defense system to protect the body from ever feeling or knowing that empty space. Defense that looks like warfare and rape and a million justifications that say: I am entitled to this. The contradiction is that truly filling that emptiness means meeting it, moving into it. It's about losing the

control that protects that emptiness, and the pain and loss that is nestled deep inside. It means changing every single thing we know about ourselves and the world.

This work is a different kind of centering, the centering of your life and your pain. And here is the rub: if you do this centering without also being in response and relationship to the damaging impact your unknowing has had on those around you, then it will just be another way of justifying and evading the truth of your own supremacy. They both have to be done at the same time: centering the sensation of your own life within your own body and working to uncenter the impact of your life and body—and the history of lives and bodies like yours—on the lives and bodies of those around you, now and as a result of the generations of your, our, grandparents and those before.

We need more white cismen who know how to let go of control and go into those hard, nasty places. We need them to show other white cismen how to do it, too. This will help us know what masculinity looks like, what being cisgendered and male looks like, when it doesn't depend on disconnection and control. Every time I hear of a story from a beloved in my life who is doing some form of this, my heart expands a little.

As bodyworkers, we know it isn't easy. How do you hold what happens when these men's contradictions come up, when they want to let others step forward, but still resent it and need some place to bring that resentment? How do we help them shift so that they can feel connection while they are stepping back, instead of needing to be in the middle to feel alive? What do we do when they have come for one or two sessions, actually really start to make change, and then never come back again? How do we hold the same trust that we hold everywhere as bodyworkers, this belief that small incremental changes can lead to large scale shifts, when we know generations of stuckness haven't changed?

Everything I am writing here could be written about every other form of dominance. I am writing about ciswhite men because, well, if they transform then, damn, a whole bunch of other things will shift around them. One of the most influential pieces in my early politicization was an essay called "Coalition Politics" by Bernice Johnson Reagon.<sup>1</sup> She was not talking about white cismen but about white feminists in the context of Women's Studies in the early 1980s. I go back to this piece often, like a

touchstone, a reminder of who I want to be in this work, because I often forget. But her work is here, woven through every sentence of my essay, and so I end with her words, because they say quickly and directly what I have taken pages to reflect: “The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who would possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive.”

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1. Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983; reprinted by Rutgers University Press, 2000). The essay is based on an address she made to the West Coast Women’s Music Festival in 1981.

# LINEAGES HEALERS HAVE TO CONTEND WITH

Throughout the 1980s, during my twenties, I lived in England. Bristol to be exact. I remember walking with a friend, someone about ten years older than me. It was a happy, sunny day. I remember skipping down the sidewalk, a horizon of Victorian buildings and winding streets laid out in front of us as we strolled down the hill. I exclaimed something about how I couldn't believe I was there and how funny *different* everything was, even though we all spoke the same language and had some amount of shared history. My friend smiled indulgently at me and said that one of the biggest differences between us is that, in England, everyone is surrounded by the past, so it is harder to imagine something new and different. In the States (Turtle Island), the opposite is true. We are all highly focused on what is possible, on what comes next, and act as though history is not something to worry about.

That conversation has stayed with me, forty-plus years later. If I were retaking that walk with my friend, I would agree with him—to a point. Not all people in the States, I would say quietly. Generally, only certain people can afford to not notice how history is still here, defining the present: those who are protected from the unfinished histories still around us, lodged in bodies and systems and Fourth of July celebrations.

I notice this historylessness when I talk with healing practitioners, especially white practitioners who came into their practices without having yet done deeper work on what has shaped their people, especially and including the impact their people have had on the lifelines of others.

When I talk with folks about ancestor work, I most often break down our people-before into three different categories. There are ancestors of blood and bone or all those ancestors who come through the egg and sperm that resulted in you that includes nonhuman relatives. Then there are ancestors of kin and intent or all of those ancestors who raised, loved, and shaped those who came before and therefore made you possible, which also includes nonhuman relatives. And then there are ancestors of lineage or

purpose, meaning all those who are the layers of wisdom that results in that activity you name as your sense of purpose—and again this includes nonhuman relatives. You are, I am, because of all of these lines, all of these webs of relation.

Most healing practitioners and organizers have a sense of being called to their work. This is your work. This is your life. There is a reason we call it a practice. We are practicing. There is no endpoint. There is no arrival. There is only practice. Just as healing is not an endpoint but a process.

We cannot claim a practice, an identity, without also claiming all of its histories, even the parts we don't like, the parts we want to separate from. We all come from people who were glorious and who were fucked up, every one of us. Some of us come from people who have mixed this basic fact with social, economic, and political power, using them to ramp up the impact of what are otherwise the basic human flaws of greed and derision. Being the people whose people used this control for personal or family gain—or being descended from them—shapes you as well. After all, over 300,000 years of our species' wisdom (and longer than that for the wisdom of all life) has shown that our best chance for long-term survival is through connection and balance. Did your ancestors of lineage remember this?

After the abolition of slavery was (legally) complete, there were thousands of white people, abolitionists, who looked around, rubbed their hands together, and said, okay, what next? What do we fix now? These white Christians who had fought against the wrongness of slavery, looked around and asked, what else can we clean up? As historian Cathleen Cahill describes the postwar situation in the U.S.:

Northerners who believed that the United States had atoned for the great national sin of slavery through the “blood and fire” of the Civil War listened to reports of western atrocities (against indigenous people) with growing alarm. After the war, they had looked upon the federal government with a new sense of optimism but worried that it could easily lose the moral high ground if other national wrongs were left unaddressed.... Just as the Civil War had been necessary to purge the sin of slavery, another cleansing would be necessary to redeem sins committed against the Indians.<sup>1</sup>

Many white, Christian women began organizing. They fought Congress to

maintain or repair the nation's honor by upholding treaties with Indigenous people. They called out treaty violations and organized mass petition drives to oppose Indian Removal. They started with fighting for these basic tenets of respect and sovereignty—and then they changed.

There are layers here, things I want to be careful with, as naming the entwined and tangled histories of the U.S. policies toward Black and Native folks. I am telling these stories about how my own ancestors of lineage have caused harm.

The United States promised the formerly enslaved forty acres and a mule. This was similar to the promise made to European and other immigrants who, through the Homestead Act, were given forty acres by the United States government in exchange for farming land recently seized from Native people who had been forced out through battle and treaty. With this central tenet of Reconstruction, equality now meant forty acres for everyone. Of course, the promise made to free Black people was never kept, which is only one part of the violent history of racial capitalism that finds ways to keep Black bodies as objects for white bodies to use for profit and control. Those postwar white women, caught up with the promise of a free individual's right to own and farm land, to apply a body's work to the care of themselves and their families, believed that the same guarantee should apply to Native people, whether they wanted it or not.

Thousands of white women felt called to join the Indian Service (now called the Bureau of Indian Affairs), established in 1824 as the vehicle to meet treaty obligations but which morphed into organizing policies of assimilation and “civilization.” These women did the intimate work of forced assimilation; the violent remaking of home, children, and bodies that was the next wave of colonization after military occupation. White Christian women were considered the most suitable for this work, having a perceived moral strength and virtue as the source of their power.

Notice what is coming up for you. What is happening in your body, your mind, right now. Stay with me, nonIndigenous healers, for this history. I am getting to our role in this story. Indigenous healers reading this, or those whose lineages contain all of these lines, as mine do, this is written to deeply honor those whose sovereignty, bodies, and cultural ways were stolen.

The federal government directed these white women to model what

civilization looked like, to just *be* their disciplined Christian selves. They did this by living among Native people as teachers and nurses. White women responded to the call from cities and towns and rural communities, especially in the East and Midwest, to attend to those less fortunate, to gain skills to support the healing of those who were (perceived to be) struggling. These women felt called to the Indian Service and brought their personal and cultural lens of freedom, healing, and the pursuit of happiness. They rolled up their sleeves, ready to give and serve, to care and love. On their terms. In their own ways.

What started as Christian women moving onto tribal lands and living among communities as “examples” who volunteered their care and services became women who staffed and taught at boarding schools. They became “moral” examples as their federal government violently stole children from their families and kin, forcing those children to forget or deny their own languages and cultures and to learn English and Christianity. These white women, fervent with missionary zeal, believed and taught that owning private property, farming the land, and accumulating wealth is the only option for being alive, civilized, equal. This, they believed was important enough that it justified separating children from their families in order to keep them safe; to ensure a “better” future for them.

Over time, these white women shape-shifted from an ethic that centered honoring and fighting for tribal sovereignty to one that enacted forced assimilation. This shape-shifting was only possible because of a belief system, an inner dialogue that said, “I know the way. I know what is best. I have insight that you don’t have, and your life will be better for it. Poor and unknowing person who has suffered, here I am. I have something you need.”

Healer friends, friends who are care workers and social workers, friends who are organizers, have you ever felt these things? Tell the truth, please. At least to yourself. I know that there have been many times throughout my practice where I have sat across from someone and believed I knew things that would make life better for them. I am not talking about the way a joint moves or how to listen to a liver or notice a shape of trauma. This is our training. We do know these things. I am talking about what we do with that knowledge, how much we use our knowledge as another cage, another set of rules that someone has to follow. We know things, but this knowledge

does not give us a divine right to know what someone sitting across from us needs. All we have are suggestions, invitations.

After close to twenty years of practice, there are still times when I have to pull myself up strongly because I feel this urge, this need to “help,” to show up with the right answers that will, in some way, make everything happier for someone who is struggling. It’s the same way of thinking: if you catch the spirit the way that I have, if you do what I do and believe what I believe, then you will be happy, you will heal. Oh, these Christian patterns are deeply rooted and it takes time for them to unwind. Until they are unwound, they create the conditions for harm rather than for healing.

I am a part of an ancestral lineage of Christian white women who have felt deeply moved to attend to those who are struggling. I am part of the lineage of those who forced their ideas of health and healing onto the bodies of those who then died or disappeared because of it. Some of those white women who joined the Indian Service also worked as nurses, a word that comes from the same root as nurture. It literally means to attend to the health and vigor of another person. Up until the mid- to late 1800s, what most nurses did was very similar to the kind of care work that a lot of people who call themselves healers today provide: supporting the nervous system to settle, helping people feel less agitated, more in the present moment and less alone.

As healing practitioners, there are two ways we are accountable to our ancestors of lineage. One is by knowing the concrete and specific stories of what our predecessors did and didn’t do. Who is named as the founder of your field? If your practice is born in a culture other than your own, then what about the people you share culture with who were first introducing this practice to people like you? When did they live? How did they—or did they not—honor the lineages that had taught them? What did they believe about healing? What did they understand as the role of a practitioner and how has that shaped your field? What about the people who directly taught you, in classrooms or online? What did they say about what they believe healing is? What did they say about your responsibility, about what this practice offers people? What are the stories that need to be named, what harms need to be witnessed, and what repairs need to be addressed?

The other way we are accountable to our ancestors of lineage is by recognizing how care work has existed in our lineage, even if the practice

we work with now would not have been recognized by our fourth great grandparent. It's about understanding this lineage of care work and then listening for how this lineage has shaped you. Is there a way—and listen right now with deep humility—that your generation has some version of action and belief that is similar to the white women who believed it was the right and best thing to force Native children to leave their homes in order to become a different, “better” version of human being?

That's a trick question because the answer is yes. You, like I, see it repeated everywhere including, sometimes, often, in our own practices. Please don't override the truth of that. Let it in.

And let it sit next to the lineage you, we, might claim with pride and honor. This is not a binary brain moment, but about holding contradiction and not trying to make anything smaller to feel better (or worse) about yourself. Some positive things managed to come through, to last despite the bullshit. Whether you call it the bright and wise ancestors or the resilience of your people, these moments of right relationship, when they happen, are pockets of oxygen that get through the cracks. Let them sit alongside the more shameful things, neither minimizing or canceling the other, both true.

In 1896, minister and social reformer Martha Waldon gave a speech entitled “The Indian in Relation to Health” at the Convention of Indian Educational Associations in St. Paul, Minnesota:

The work of the school, then, is to build up from the beginning “the whole child,” to expiate the sins of the past by heroic work in the present. Free gymnastic exercises and breathing exercises, introduced into the classroom work, would be very helpful to these students to relieve the tortured muscles unaccustomed to long sitting, to expand the poorly developed chests and to form a habit of quick obedience. From a teacher’s standpoint it might seem a doubtful expenditure of time to introduce a ten-minute exercise between recitations, but the drill would be very beneficial, and progressively so, as the students advanced in years, and became able to take more complicated exercises. This would, in a measure, take the place of a military drill, where that is impractical, though I believe that something like a military inspection is always possible and always healthful and should be recommended both for MORAL AND PHYSICAL REASONS.<sup>2</sup>

Reading this led to me writing the piece you are reading right now. We don't have a single word in English for how the violence of ableism, racism, and colonialism work together as a single unit to weave shame, disconnection, and deep physical/spiritual harm into the bodies of those being controlled (pause here to honor how much brilliant resistance there always is to the shape of this violence). I read the sentence about students having ten-minute exercise breaks while they are learning and I thought, well fuck. Here is one of the often-repeated suggestions for supporting good self-care; step away from the screen and move your body on a regular basis.

There is nothing wrong with the suggestion. It's a good suggestion. What is at play here is the context for the suggestion. Why is this being shared? What's the purpose of it? Why are you suggesting this? What do you believe will happen as a result? What do you believe will happen if someone doesn't do this, doesn't follow your orders? If they don't, gasp, follow your suggestion, your direction, your orders?

This is where these thousands of white women got lost. This is how they moved from honoring sovereignty to forcing assimilation as a kind of care work. They forgot how to fully honor another human life, the radical consent it takes, the clarity that your life, individually and collectively, is your life and my life, individually and collectively, is mine. All life is complex and can only be fully known and experienced by the one who is living it. They forgot that change is only liberatory when it is defined and held by those at the center of the change.

Practitioner friends, social workers, therapists, organizers, faith leaders—take a moment and really listen, really sense in, and ask yourself this question: how are these ancestors of lineage still informing and shaping your work? How are you resisting? Then, in prayer or with a shout, reach out to the bright ones, your ancestors of lineage who are from before this violence or who have worked to shift it, reach out to them and ask them for help as you reach out to those within your practice and ask the questions again: how are we honoring the sovereignty of life rather than trying to control it so that we feel like we have done a good job?

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1. Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 22.

2. Martha Waldron, “The Indian in Relation to Health,” read at the Convention of Indian

Educational Associations, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1896. Reprinted in *The Sanitarian* 37 (1896), 303–10.

# AGITATION AS A PART OF HEALING ... AND ORGANIZING

It is glorious and astonishing to notice how many political, cultural, kin spaces start meetings or gatherings with some kind of grounding. Sometimes breath-based, sometimes somatic, sometimes visionary, this practice helps people orient toward each other and themselves and then, hopefully, come more fully into the present moment. Together. Sometimes gatherings are closed in the same way, wrapping up what was shared by integrating it with sensing, feeling, breathing, something settling before we go our separate ways.

I love that this happens. As I've written before, when I first started learning about how the body holds and processes pain and pleasure, I didn't know how to bring it into traditionally rational spaces. Others have been wiser and clearer, and I have learned from them. These practices, many that are culturally based and some that are not, show up more and more often. They change what is possible in those rooms.

What doesn't show up as often are the ways in which we *activate* together. The practices that help us go hard, wild, loud, and chaotic. It is rare that I am in spaces where unsettling or turbulence happens in ways that don't destroy relationships but bring us closer together. Agitation politics, something so common in the 1960s and 1970s, seem to be less taught in organizing spaces. There are good reasons for this. To purposefully agitate or activate someone, unless it is held in the right relationship, can be a massive abuse of power. Too many of the agitational political stances of the sixties and seventies were really ways for cismen to justify being an asshole. One person's agitational stance is another person's bullying. There is necessary discernment here.

At the same time, throwing agitation out is not the right answer. Too many of the histories and systems that are held in our bodies have no interest in changing. They are clever and quick and will find ways to hide behind all kinds of things. Some kinds of deep cultural freezes or control states will never shift without agitation. Doing settling practices can sometimes be the same as turning to someone enraged at an injustice they are experiencing

and saying, “Stop making such a big deal out of it. Just calm down. Relax.”

There are all kinds of times where relaxing isn’t what the moment needs. When we commit to agitation as much as settling, it gets easier to discern when action is needed and when it’s time to wait, to feel, to notice.

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In the months after Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson, a number of Black organizers approached a group of local non-Black organizers and asked us to do some work with and around white folks. So many white folks were showing up in attempted solidarity with Black Lives Matter but were doing it in a way that, unintentionally, kept centering their needs and their wants. We were asked to do some training around what it means for white people to act in solidarity. So four of us—Liz Loeb, Arif Mamdani, Ricardo Levins Morales, and myself—met together to create a day-long gathering for white folks involved in antiracist work. One of the cool things that came out of it was an antiracist self-check card. We came up with the idea together and the brilliant Ricardo designed it.<sup>1</sup> The card was intended to get people to pause before acting and to notice where their desire for action came from and who their action would serve. That was largely the reason we were called in. So many white folks were doing things that made them feel better, feel like they were active, and that could settle the agitation of their nervous systems, but had nothing to do with what Black organizers actually needed from them.

- 1) Why do I feel an urge to act/not act?**
- 2) Who will benefit from my action/inaction immediately?**
- 3) Who will benefit from my action/inaction later on?**
- 4) What options for action (including inaction) are available to me?**
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_?**



The first gathering was powerful. The truth of the moment we were in and the energy of showing up at this event meant that a lot of truth-telling, emotion, and connection swelled up in that room. People wanted more so we organized a second gathering. The second, a month or so later, intended to deepen and expand the first. From the moment people entered the room, we could tell this crowd was different. There were fewer organizers in the space and more white people who were newer to movement work. The energy in the room was tighter, more controlled. Although encouraged to take risks, more people were protecting themselves by staying at the

surface, saying the “right” things rather than the true things, or just being silent.

The four of us conferred on the sidelines constantly. How were we going to shift this? We made a few impassioned speeches, kept shifting what we were doing but it wasn’t changing. That tightness of white protection remained. A long-term organizer who is also a white, cisgender woman, pulled a few of us aside as another white cisgender woman was talking. She asked us if we trusted her to jump in and do some agitational work. She had an idea that might shift the energy in the room. We trusted her. We said yes.

This beloved then proceeded to do some brilliant agitational organizing with a woman who was speaking. She asked and kept asking the hard questions, the deeper whys, rather than just listening to the surface of the woman’s words. She challenged and pushed and prodded, and the other woman began to fray. When she did, my friend pulled back and explained what she did and why she did it. You could sense the unrest in the room, people feeling protective of the white woman, people confused about how to be, freeze states, fight states, flight states, they were all there. Active.

We took a break because we wanted to give the woman who had been, well, directly agitated, some support. She hadn’t expected this and we hadn’t fully created consent at the front end. Except that we did: we had people’s consent to do work around whiteness, together, and in that space. What my friend had done was push so that all of the patterns that protect whiteness showed up in full force. Some people were angry. They couldn’t hear why we would make this facilitation choice; they simply perceived someone being mean. Other people were nervous, not sure how to be, feeling unsafe and unclear. All of the patterns, all of the ways white people protect and hide and then react to being pushed—they were there, in the room.

There was a lot of emotion and energy in the room and we hadn’t quite planned this out. We had the participants go into small groups, we talked with each other, we worked with what was there and we noticed that, while what was happening wasn’t resolution, it was definitely not frozen.

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I come from people who had and sometimes still have mourners as part of their community. Mourners are people who show up at funerals and grieve

and wail and sob from the deepest part of their selves. They are there to help move the energy in the room. My people did not have nuanced language about trauma, freeze, and stuckness. But they understood that the body's response to shock and grief is to freeze up, to tighten up around that pain. We are tight because our aliveness does not want to let go. Letting go means accepting that the person we have loved is no longer here. It doesn't matter what our mind is telling us. Our bodies, our lives, the parts of us deeply connected to the one who has passed, we don't know how to be on the other side of their death. It does not make life-sense for someone we love to no longer be here. So we tighten up. Close down. Try, at a cellular level, to stay away from the truth of what just happened.

When mourners come into the room, they come to agitate. Their cries, lamentations, songs, and wailing literally shake up the air molecules, shake up the space in the room. The vibrations of these cries then expands and touches the tightness of your body, you as the one who has been left behind. This shaking, this agitation, creeps its way into the tightness, the closed-down-ness of your body. As this happens, the feelings, the horror, the grief, the rage, the confusion, the shock—all of those things you feel start to unravel. And in their unraveling, you too begin to grieve and to mourn. To wail and shudder, to sweat or faint or cry. They are horrible, these feelings, edging beyond intolerable. Yet, somehow, you have to tolerate them.

It is important that you, that we, are not alone. We know the mourners' role. We have consented for them to be here. We know that what is going through their bodies, our bodies, is the present moment grief and the ancient grief, because all grief gathers together when new grief arises. And none of this is about feeling better. None of this is about getting past what we have lost. But the movement, the ending of the freeze, means that now there is life rather than death. Now there is the being in the middle of it, the truth of it, and waking up to what we don't want to hold.

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Some of you reading this have no choice but to be agitated, and some do. You leave your home and how your body is or is not visible to other people, and how they respond to it affects how agitated you might be. Some of us move into public space and we are not visible; we do not have to be hypervigilant for potential threats. Some of us can assume the likelihood of

safety, in a public space or at home. Others cannot. Talking about agitation as a form of healing has to include awareness of how much agitation from the outside world acts against you all of the time. This doesn't mean that you don't also have deep, frozen places; places where the truth of some grief or loss has been held down, closed off, and untended for generations. It's just, if you are already living with the constancy of a thousand cuts, more pushing might not be the starting place for you.

This requires constant discernment. Am I resting because I am exhausted or am I resting to avoid action? Is my rest something I feel physically, true rest, or is it just a way of shutting down and turning off? I once had a session with someone I love deeply who felt frozen and cut off, the words they used were "dead inside and out." In our session, they were standing and I pushed at them, poking until they brought their arms up and asked me to stop. Which I did immediately. The feeling of it, asking me to stop and having me honor their request, started to open something that had been closed down tight. Not comfortable, not easy, but providing something alive to work with. I would never have done this if they had not strongly consented and if we did not already have lots of trust built between us.

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There are many reasons why bodies freeze deeply. Deep freeze is one response to an old hurt or series of hurts that our bodies have tightened around to protect. Not all deep freeze needs agitation to shift it. Sometimes, a deep freeze needs the tenderness and patience of listening, loving, and caring until the body that is frozen begins to feel safe enough to move. Again, ending violence is the first step in healing.

It's the deep freeze that is supported by systemic structures and histories, that actually has no reason to change, that can rarely be shifted by tenderness alone. It's not only whiteness that carries this deep stuckness. It's true of some forms of cisgender masculinity, of multigenerational wealth, and more. It's made up of ideas passed down generationally: it is not okay to cry, keep your shit together, this separation and numbness is what love is and how dare you expect anything more? Anyone can experience deep freeze, but only some of us are given social power based on how strongly we stay controlled.

We need so much agitation. Agitation in every way. Agitation that pushes

against the stuck numb coldness of what is deep inside so that the pattern shifts and something, anything starts to move. But we need this agitation to be healing. After all, in recent years, Trump and every other fascist or narcissistic dictator have been masters at agitating people toward violence and hatred. That is not the agitation we are talking about.

Mourners come into the space because they are expected. Not everyone responds to them in the same way. Not everyone erupts or shivers or weeps, but the room itself can't stay stuck. While mourners are not addressing power relationships per se, every cultural tradition has some element whose sole role is to poke the people who have power.

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Western medicine is beginning to lift up the power of sound waves to support bones as they heal.<sup>2</sup> When a bone breaks or shatters, it reshapes itself through a kind of bone memory that fashions it into the proper bone shape—most of the time. Sometimes a bone, just like any other element of life, is sluggish. Frozen, in a way. Directed ultrasound (high-frequency sound waves) quicken the rate of bone repair. No one knows exactly why this happens and, because no one knows for sure, there are many medical folks who say that this isn't really happening. But it is. For generations upon generations, traditional people have known that directing sound through song or drumming or movement supports a body to heal.

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Agitation is not the same thing as taking control of a situation. Stepping in and stopping violence as it is happening is not agitation. Fighting for survival is not agitation. Agitation is not simply the poke to get things moving, it is how the body is held and supported as the movement agitation initiates carries through, shifting things, unsettling things, changing things.

We create the conditions for agitation to be a tool of healing rather than a mechanism of power and control. We create those conditions by building trust, relationship. To take on the role of the agitator carries responsibility. The responsibility to stay deeply connected to the person being agitated, to attune to them and notice the cues that say something is about to well up through the cracks. If you are going to agitate as part of healing, then you have to stay for the cracking, for the upwelling, and for what happens on

the other side, until the agitated person has enough of themselves held steady to continue on.

And sometimes, we just need to poke the beast and then leave, praying that the tremors carry through and shake loose something that was numbing out the heart.

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Embryonic stem cells, the cells that are there in the beginning, right after sperm and egg say hello, are the cells that eventually become the sacred specificity of each one of us. Embryonic stem cells thrive, grow strongest, when they are shaken. Too much shaking, and they cannot follow their own rhythm, they no longer thrive. Too little movement, and the same happens.

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As is always true, there is nothing that I can say, ever, that hasn't already been said before, in this case, by Frederick Douglass: "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

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1. To learn more about Ricardo Levins Morales's art and design work, go to [rlmartstudio.com](http://rlmartstudio.com).

2. There is all kinds of research available on the use of sound waves to heal and regrow bones. See Lauren Woods, "Researchers Accelerating Broken Bone Healing," *UConnToday*, September 7, 2017, [today.uconn.edu/2017/09/researchers-accelerating-broken-bone-healing](http://today.uconn.edu/2017/09/researchers-accelerating-broken-bone-healing); B. S. Vien, et al., "Modal Frequencies Associations with Musculoskeletal Components of Human Legs for Extracorporeal Bone Healing Assessment Based on a Vibration Analysis Approach," *Sensors* 22, no. 2 (January 16, 2022): 670.

# Coming into the Present Moment

## TIME TRAVELING, NOT TRIGGERS

Not that long ago, I was sitting in a meeting. It was an intense gathering of people. There was electricity in the air, so much passion, hunger, anger, and pain crackling. The air was on fire with it. The job of the meeting's organizers was to help shape that power in a unified direction. Everyone who was in that room had chosen to be in the room. Everyone was, for the most part, politically aligned. The organizers were doing a great job of telling the truth about what we were doing, about the risks involved, and about the strategies for change. It doesn't matter what the meeting was specifically about because I, like you, have been in dozens of meetings just like this.

As the facilitator at front of the room was trying to help us to focus, to listen to each other, to feel connected and what was possible, one of the community members in the room turned them and shouted, "The way that you're talking about this is triggering me! I can't participate unless you change how you are talking about this!"

All the bodies in the conversation froze. The facilitator was a respected community member. The community member in the audience was a respected organizer. The conversation was a struggle, a hunger, a whole bunch of energy and pain working to focus itself in the direction of strategy. People were tired: pandemic tired, police shootings tired, meetings tired. Hardly anyone had access to their best selves.

The facilitator paused and waited. Everyone waited. Then the triggered person got up, enraged, and left the space. A few folks jumped up and followed them out, including one of the event organizers. Some people turned to each other and shared opinions. Others zoned out. The facilitator addressed the situation, saying something about how hard it is to find language that works for everyone and that they didn't want to cause harm. They left to attend to the person who had run out, and a different organizer stepped forward to keep us moving. Time passed and the meeting went on but the electricity? The emerging power? It had fizzled—or, rather, had tightened and dropped. It felt like we had abandoned the feeling part of the work and retreated into the thinking part of the work. The heart of it, the

power that had been lifting and orienting, faded.

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Do you remember moments like this? In organizing spaces or just with groups of people gathered together for any reason? Do you remember moments when the intensity suddenly goes horizontal, like a weapon in your hand that shifts and starts hurting those around you? Moments when there is suddenly confusion about who is responsible for what and whether to stop everything to deal with the emotional needs of one or two people? Who were you in the scenario? The one holding the space? The one who felt invisible or overly visible in terms of the story being told? A witness on the sidelines? Have you been in more than one of these roles? What did you do? Have you ever seen moments like this held really well?

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Here is what I am not going to do with this piece: present something as the right answer. I don't believe right answers exist for hard moments like this. Even though my example combines several experiences I've had, the specificity of each matters. Who was in the room, whether or not they already knew each other, matters. How much relationship betrayal is already in the room in the form of different raced, gendered, classed experiences also matters. The culture that is leading the facilitation and whether or not it matches the cultures of the people in the rooms, matters. The weather outside, the presence of illness, people's ages, and much more. It all matters.

My partner and I used to tell our daughter that every room and every interaction on the street is a moment of community. Our role in each of these moments is to notice the others around us and sense our relationship to one another. These are always complex moments, full of projections as well as real and deep connections. Within all of this information, we then make choices about who we are and what we do as one part of this community moment. Moments like the ones I am describing here are about how we respond, each to the other, and then what happens on the other side of the response. Real-time relationships.

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The concept, though not the term itself, of being "triggered" emerged just

after World War I. Within Western histories, this was the first time that people with social power and rank began to take seriously what was happening in the bodies of soldiers who had witnessed violence.

Psychologists called it “shell shock.” These days, we call it trauma. It is the unfinished pain and violence that the body still holds, waiting to find a way to complete the experience so that it knows that it is safe again.

It wasn’t until the 1930s that the noun “trigger” became a verb meaning “to set in motion.” Over time, it was used to describe what happens when a person experiences something that re-activates their held trauma. A soldier might hear a loud noise on the street and suddenly drop to the ground and roll beneath a car. Fireworks crackling might fill them with fear. Soldiers describe this terror response as immediate, like a gun suddenly going off. When it happens, they can’t remember where they are. The trauma sits dormant inside and then something ignites it, pulls the trigger, and it’s not in the past but defining the present moment. For the person experiencing it, time has doubled and the past ridden in to take over the present.

It was sometime in the 1980s when I first heard the concept of “triggers” as we now understand the term. I was part of a support group for survivors of sexual violence. I remember feeling unsettled; why would we use a gun-related word to describe what happens to women who have been sexually violated by men? It felt like using a patriarchal tool to describe the impact of patriarchal violence. I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know another word.

I started to learn about trauma, wounds-that-have-not-healed, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Shifts in Western science, particularly within biology and genetics, meant that the lines between what is physical and what is psychological were starting to blur. At around the same time, I began to learn from the teachings of Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart, who first used the term “historical trauma” to describe the impact the many genocidal policies directed at Native people.<sup>1</sup> I learned that trauma could be generational, historical, physical, cultural, and more.

There is something extraordinarily settling to learn how our life force, in moments of threat and potential danger, can move into a pattern that operates faster than our thinking. It allows a relaxation of the assumption of responsibility. It is deep inside, old. It’s hardwired into us, helping us to get the hell out of potential or actual danger, to run when we can or, if we can’t get away, to turn and engage. And then, alongside flight and fight, there is

*freeze*, a pause when neither running or engaging is possible, a waiting for the right time to unwind and act.

Somatic release is that moment when the energy frozen inside begins to warm and our bodies do all of the things: shaking, sweating, emoting, moving, shouting, laughing, screaming, singing, jumping, and more. There is a specific way of letting go of control—that ego part of the mind that keeps the frozen parts all tightly wound—that feels like dying and living at the same time. The body can go through a range of expressions and sensations that are not cognitively controlled, sometimes forming patterns, sometimes chaotically. The wisdom of many cultural or spiritual practices has these forms of letting go built in. Certain ceremonies and collective practices support and invite uninhibited movement and sound so that all of these hard and scary things held in the tissues have the chance to move and release, integrate, change.

I compare this with the dreary, controlled hymns that we sang in my childhood Catholic Church, the lifelessness of that music as compared to the older, soaring depth of some Gregorian chant or the even older, pre-Christian origins of the *tarantella*, the dance of the spiders, where movement is both scripted and wild. The cultural framing of professionalism and adulthood have largely become categories, shapings, that raise their eyebrows at uninhibited silliness. This suspicion of uncontrolled movement is one of the weapons used to dismiss bodies of color, bodies perceived as fem, bodies perceived as poor. Every supremacist ideology depends on a public presentation of control—tight, emotionless control.

Did you grow up with or do you now choose collective practices that support movement, change, and release? Do you long for them? What is getting in the way? This is such an important question. How much of what is getting in the way is outside your body and how much is carried within?

When the body doesn't get the chance to release and shift, to shudder and move and weep and laugh and sweat, when hard things happen and the body has to tighten around them, then it freezes that experience and keeps it held inside. Controlled. This is supposed to be a temporary measure, something in place until the danger passes (remember, the first part of healing is ending violence) or the body is in a different space and can shudder back to itself. Without that shudder, the freeze just deepens and

then, when new children are born, they are raised within that freeze, that control, and then their children are born and this is no longer about a specific wound held inside an individual. It becomes generational. It becomes who we are.

This is how systemic oppression works. The danger or the threat of the danger never really ends. It is always there, woven through the shape of a police car, a man walking down the street, a boss who cares less about your life than what you produce. The freeze, your focused attention, remains, waiting for the threat to pass, but it never does. Even when we are alone, even when external conditions change, the threat is still carried inside the body. It is absorbed into the tissues, enclosed, waiting to finish what started so that we can come back to rest. Some of us are living with frozen responses to threats that are actually still out there, still alive and on the streets. And some of us are living with frozen responses to threats that are no longer there, until we don't remember how to be the people we were before.

Many of us have layers of both.

When folks at Kindred Healing Justice Collective were thinking about healing and movement, they turned to elders in the South, Black and Brown beloveds who had stayed in movement through state violence and the loss of so many loved ones.<sup>2</sup> They asked: how have you managed to stay in the struggle so long? How have you managed to maintain the belief that something different is possible? And they heard stories of rootwork and community song and prayer. They heard about the land and touch. They learned about the things that the elders did to remember who they are and what is possible, separate from the violence they were experiencing. And the framework of healing justice began to emerge.

Again, the first part of healing is ending violence. As long as a threat is active and present, it can be harder to discern in the present moment if the actual threat or the threat of the threat is here, acting on our bodies. It can be hard, almost impossible, to feel safe for even a second, or safe enough, because vigilance has the body watching the door in case the threat shows up.

A dear friend of mine recently asked me a very good question, one he said was a paraphrase of an Audre Lorde quote: who wears the mask of your fear? I asked my partner this question and she talked about people on the

street with nefarious motives. As she is butch with all of the mixed gender signals that confuse gender-police, she can get all kinds of intensity from people who are pissed that she doesn't follow their rules. She talked about the police and guns and strangers. For me, it was the opposite. I am more afraid of people who are close to me than people I don't know. I admitted to her, my longest struggle, so many years into our relationship, is to still deeply trust her with my frightened messy bits.

We talked about the spaces we are in where it's more okay to talk about threats from outside our homes than threats inside our homes. And other spaces where the opposite is true. We reflected on how few spaces we know of that are able and willing to hold all of the reasons terror suddenly shows up in a body: both the systemic attack of state violence and the intimate attack of family and partner violence—the bodies that carry both forward.

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A trusted teacher, a woman of color who has had a very central role in shaping how politicized communities talk about and experience trauma in Minneapolis, once said to me that she won't ever just *talk* about trauma. She gets asked to teach, to give presentations on trauma and how to deal with it. Many of us who do this work receive such requests often. Give us some tools, people say, for dealing with the weight of pain and disconnection we carry. My beloved mentor said that she won't say yes to this unless there is also time dedicated toward practice, not just toward absorbing information. She says that our survival strategies, however much they have evolved to cope with family and state violence, are still our survival strategies. For the body and its survival strategies, change can feel like dying. This is true even when our thinking-brain loves what we are learning. The survival-self operates faster than our thinking-self and, when it comes across something new, even as our thoughts are experiencing pleasure, our survival strategies are often doubling down.

For our survival-selves, different doesn't mean good. Our survival strategies prefer to operate by what we already know, even if what we know doesn't support our liberation. It might not be the best way to survive but it has worked in the past. We are still here. My teacher explained that, when we give our brains information about a thing without being deep in practice with it, it just gives us more tools and strategies to protect ourselves from

change. Everything can be a tool or a weapon. Information can be used for liberation or it can be used like a shield. How many times have you met folks who have all of the right language about a thing, but whose actions and ways of being are in contradiction to their words? This is what our own brains can do, getting close to but preventing us from going into the hard places, the painful places that are frozen up tight. My mentor was clear that, without enough time in practice, teaching about trauma would most likely become another shield to protect us from change rather than a tool for our shared liberation.

Alejandra Tobar Alatriz, a friend who has been a practitioner for over twenty years, reflected recently that she remembers when people began to come into bodywork spaces carrying their trauma in front of them like a box. Here is who I am, they said, this pain, this trauma. This is me and I want you to meet me and help me. How sad this made her, this new identification. And that this was new. Previously, people had come with stories, with confusion, with details. This is who I am and then also this and this. Then something shifted. It reminds me of another friend, a professor at a university, who reflected that her students are more and more able to talk about the complexities of their pain and trauma but less able to talk about the systems that create the conditions for this pain to exist. She said it happens across race, gender, and class experiences—this insightful but very individualized awareness of the scope and scale of pain.

If I were talking to you in person, I would slow right down here and go into practice. These words are only words. The question is, what arises in your body as you read them? The concrete specificity of it. If we were in the room together, I would ask you to tell me stories. How have you been hurt? How have you remembered what is beautiful and possible? What do you do when you forget? Trauma is not an abstract generalization: it is the specific details of your experience. Of the experience of your people. Of the things you worry about for your children. Of the countless ways you have thrived and remembered yourself as holy. Your life is specific, concrete, real. Your histories, your ancestors, are specific, concrete, real.

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I rarely use the word “trigger” anymore. I think it hides and disempowers more than it helps what wants to move and change. Everything about the

language of triggering moves our senses to orient toward what it is that is triggering us. You triggered me. I was triggered by that movie, that song, that action, that story. If you or that movie or that song or that action or that story didn't exist, then I wouldn't be triggered. Therefore, being triggered is your fault. Stop triggering me. Be accountable for how you have triggered me. I can only feel better once you have accounted for your impact on me.

I've heard people accuse others of "weaponizing their triggers": but triggers *are* weapons. That's their whole point. They set off a gunshot, a directed violence.

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Let's return to the room I opened this essay with, to the person who could disrupt the room's energy with their trigger. What that room needed was the time to tell stories. It needed, we all need, enough space and support to know that our stories will be listened to. We need to tell the stories and to wait, sensing how they land, and then what comes up in the bodies that heard them.

This thing we call trauma is the insistence of our life force that what we experienced be heard and witnessed. It is this life force showing up and shouting, "Hey, we are not finished here! Before we move on, we have to stop and attend to this because it is getting in the way of being together."

Most of the unfinished histories we hold in our bodies contain experiences of relationship betrayal. Someone was supposed to keep us safe and didn't. Another human being, our kin, intentionally savaged our bodies or the bodies of our people. Someone who said they loved us then hurt us without repair. Or a state, a church, an army, trampled over the bodies of our loved ones as though they were only stones on the road. Someone heard us cry, saw us bleed, and ignored it. Or, when we were small, the adults around us could not attune to us because of their pain or because no one ever attuned to them, and this resulted in a kind of existential loneliness. Our pain, our family's pain, our community's pain, and the memory of this relationship betrayal arcs forward, shaping our bodies, our lives, the pace of our breathing.

At their most intimate, oppression and supremacy are relationship betrayal. Real people in real time who have either done or not done a thing that has caused pain and suffering for someone else. Sometimes this has

happened in our homes. Sometimes this has happened outside of our homes. When I sit in rooms with the descendants of those who have harmed and been harmed, I wonder at the stories we never tell each other.

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Western physics is catching up to what Indigenous traditions have long known: time is not linear. Time is a theory and all theories are poetry, not something that defines a thing, but that instead raises possibilities for why a thing is as it is. The practice of time is just that, a practice. Carlo Rovelli, in his book *The Order of Time*, describes how our experience of time is based upon what we expect to experience, not on all the possible ways to experience this thing we call time.<sup>3</sup> Time does not flow in a singular direction, but it *feels* as though it does. It is a kind of habit. The habit of having greater access to the present and an imagined future is not the same as *not* having access to the past. This thing we call trauma, these moments held in our tissues, are portals through which the forward-moving habit of time pauses and we become intimate with the past.

This intimacy is not just about the hurt. It is also about the glory. We time travel when we pick up an object or see a landscape and feel some resonance, a physical sense of relationship. Irene Ammar taught me this: listening for and noticing that resonance, that sense of connection, and then letting it teach you, reach deep inside to change you. Sherri Mitchell Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset (Penobscot) teaches the same thing.<sup>4</sup> She tells her non-Indigenous readers that, when you hear an Indigenous person speak and you feel that recognition, that resonance inside, listen to it. That is the echo of your Indigenous ancestors, reaching across time and reminding you that this is your history, too. Let yourself feel that resonance, feel what is happening inside, but don't move from there to grabbing or trying to own the experience. Feeling resonance is different from feeling the same as someone or something. Each one of us belongs to a people, even if that sense of belonging feels frayed and disorganized. We belong to histories and presents. How we let ourselves time travel, how we let these things shape us, they are part of what shapes the future that emerges.

When our bodies, individually or collectively, feel the weight of our unfinished histories and that weight shapes how we experience the room we are in, I use the language of time travel rather than triggers. Because that is

what our bodies are doing. And, as painful as it often is, this time traveling is a gift, a shift in the habit of present-future. Something is here, something wants to be known.

I am time traveling. We are time traveling.

I think about the room I started with. In the scenario I described, both the facilitator and the community member shared the same race and gender. This only matters because it made what happened simpler, more easily seen through the layers. There were some forms of relationship betrayal operating that were not between them. The community member was trying to explain something and the facilitator was lost in their own words and, well, being a crappy facilitator by being self-centered and pushy. They were not being abusive. They were not being violent. It would have been fair for someone to say, “Hey, you are being rude and pushy: back off and let the community member get a word in!” But everyone was tired. No one had the clarity to watch the energy vibrations and stagnations in the room. And the community member got lost in their past, in histories where violence actually did happen because no one was listening, no one could hear them as they called for help. They began time traveling and, for reasons that were both wise and defeated, they did not believe that anything could be different. So they left.

I wish I had been less tired, less fuzzy at that moment. All the clarity I am writing with came after the fact, after I talked with both people. I wish I had found a way to hit the pause button, to do something that helped all of the time traveling that was happening. I could have suggested breathing, moving, taking a break, listening to a poem, singing together, or simply pairing up to talk about what we were feeling.

Even though it was one person who was time traveling, experiencing the coupling of past and present, what happened to her in the past did not happen to her alone. She was the one time traveling, but turning toward her, pausing and listening, would have been an opportunity for all of us to go deeper together. Because we all come from the same times she was traveling to. Because what she has experienced, while not exactly the same, resonated with the reason we had gathered together in that room.

I have a friend who experiences multiple environmental allergies. The chemicals in the air, the artificially changed chemical signature of wheat, dairy, and a thousand other foods, make her desperately, violently ill. It is

rare that she is able to experience life without having some part of her system overwhelmed by it. She's also dealt for years with doctors and others calling her crazy, thinking that what she is experiencing is "only" in her mind, not in her body, as though those are different things. As the years have gone by and the truth of the impact of environmental harm on our many different bodies has become clear, she has had more people believe her, but few are willing to take on the truth of what she lives with. This is another example of how much our collective survival strategies don't make sense. We should be turning toward her and people like her, among the first bodies to share with us the truth of the impact of what we have done to our home. Instead, we push them to the side, trying to ignore the message that their bodies are sharing of the past folding into the present.

I am time traveling. We are time traveling.

Here is the wound, the confusion between a separate "I" and a connected "we." They are not the same and they are not separate. When I am time traveling, it is about what is happening to me. It is rising from within me, my life, my agency. Agency, which oppression and domination work to remove is what happens when I claim the right to my own life. I want this, I don't want that. Time traveling means I am aware that the histories I hold are showing up in me right now. They are here, impacting how much or how little I can be in the room along with the rest of you. It is not your responsibility to come close to me right now, but if you do, this is an opportunity for us to heal some of what is in my body as well as between us.

There is no such thing as individual trauma, although we experience it individually. Every frozen story waiting to finish is a story about what did or did not happen to create the conditions for this present hurt, those involved near and far in the actual action of the hurt, and those who were or were not able to show up and help hold the hurt. Every frozen story cuts off part of our aliveness, which then impacts how we are able to show up or not show up within our lives, how we love or can't love, how we trust or avoid.

Assuming that present-time violence is not taking place and not preventing my ability to act, then with this awareness of time traveling, I have a choice. I can leave. I can stay. I can ask for help. I can cry. I can shake. I can tell someone the stories that my body is sharing with me, as sensation or image or past event. I can tell someone and maybe, in the

telling, be heard—and maybe the wound will notice that here is different, this moment is not the same. Maybe the wound, itself so old and tired, will get enough that it can begin to finish its story. This time, the past may be showing up in my body. Next time it may show up in yours.

This is my prayer to all of us: may we, in our rooms, our meetings, our moments of vision, have the time and space needed to listen, together, when we are time traveling. May we have the elders and the spiritual teachers, the facilitators and the unexpected wise ones, who can help us to go deep, to walk across time back to the periods when the hurt began, and to fully and finally be with it, meeting it with exactly what is needed for the past to change how it lives in the future.

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1. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, “*Oyate Ptayela*: Rebuilding the Lakota Nation Through Addressing Historical Trauma Among Lakota Parents,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 2, nos. 1–2 (1999): 109–126.

2. Kindred Healing Justice Collective is at kindredsouthernhjcollective.org.

3. Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017).

4. For Sherri Mitchell Weh’na Ha’mu Kwasset’s work, go to her website: sacredinstructions.life.

# GRAVITY, THE FIRST REFLEX

From the minute sperm and egg meet, a process begins. Each cellular shift is a kind of unfolding, an emerging within the fluid of the womb. For these first nine months, this is all we know. Fluid, in the beginning without clear boundary and, as we get closer to birth, fluid that is contained on all sides by a wall we can't yet cross.

We emerge in the space of infinite possibility. That's what it means to grow within water. Every single direction is possible, all at the same time. We can lengthen and widen without coming against a boundary, a border. And yet, because it is fluid, we also get constant reassurance, this light pressure against our emerging skin. Our felt-sense knowing that we are not alone, we are surrounded, contained, supported with the space to stretch, grow, and change.

Every aspect of how we emerge, from the first cellular doubling to how our bodies learn how to jump into the air to catch a ball, is guided by reflexes. You can think of reflexes as an ancestral gift; something encoded in your DNA. Not every body has the same reflexes nor does every reflex show up in the same way but there is a pattern here that our ancestors have handed forward as the likeliest way that we will both thrive and survive. Likeliest never means only.

When we are born, when we exit the first world of fluid into the second world of earth and air, a reflex kicks in to help us adjust. No matter how we get out of the body, down through the birth canal or lifted up out of the abdomen, our tissues go from only knowing fluid to suddenly feeling the relentless pull of gravity. This first reflex, called the tonic lab (short for tonic labyrinthine reflex), helps our bodies move against the demanding heaviness of gravitational pull. Tonic lab is called a primitive reflex, meaning we developed it when we were still lizards and other relatives first moving out of the ocean and onto land.

Reflexes are like those teachers that used to pop up on Microsoft Word when you first downloaded a new program. If you are old enough, you might remember the little paper clip avatar with the startled expression that suddenly popped into the lower right hand of your screen, asking if you

wanted help formatting a document. Reflexes are like that, only less annoying. They pop up in the body at the appropriate time, giving a nudge to nerve endings that nudge muscles, which means that suddenly, without being taught, the baby rolls over, lifts their head, starts doing the back and forth swimming movement that leads to crawling, reaches for the table and pulls themselves up, takes that first unsteady step that resolves into walking, and then learns to jump away from the gravity that holds its body down. Reflexes are made up of thousands of tiny concrete details that, over time, come together in a body that, in jumping up to grab an apple off the highest branches, finds out how to move against gravity even as gravity continues grounding it.

Go ahead and practice. Lie flat on the ground and feel the truth of gravity below us. If you are someone who swims, can you remember that heavy feeling when you first come out of a pool or lake after you have been swimming for a while? Gravity is that heaviness. It starts with this, letting that heaviness pull you into the earth and, significantly, feeling the land, the physical truth of earth below you, catching and supporting this heaviness as it weighs down.

I have never studied yoga. I do not know enough about the rich and complex history of its lineage and teachings to explain why any particular pose or asana exists. But the first time I was invited to do *savasana*, or “corpse pose,” I immediately thought, yes, of course. This is the ground of the first reflex. Prone on the ground or sitting/leaning against any surface, soft and open, and being with our cells as they fall into and push against gravity. This is the baseline that we then push against as our cells arrange themselves into order.

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I meant it when I said practice. Seriously, I want you to put this book down, bring your body to gravity, and listen. If you are able, lie on your back on the floor, arms and legs relaxed and open, head supported and mouth gently open. If the floor is not an option for your body, then stay in our chair or lean your back against a wall, letting gravity support as much of you as you are physically able, and then just listen.

What did you notice? What did you feel your body, this mix of fluid and membrane, do? Did you sink into the floor, chair, or wall? Did your body

pull away from the force, staying somewhat suspended, almost hovering just on top of the surface? Did you sink so far that you could barely pull yourself up, as though you submerged and disappeared? Did you notice emotions, physical sensations, a desire to move get stronger the longer that you stayed there? Was it impossible to notice anything because of how much your mind was chattering?

As you reflect, are you getting, “Oh shit, I didn’t do it right!” or some version of how you’re not a good enough healer, person, life-form because you couldn’t still yourself for two minutes? Be wary, systems of supremacy have long ago found the cracks in the self-care and mindfulness industries and have shoved perfectionism and the Protestant work ethic into its peacefully beating heart. This makes “being present” another item on the to-do list, so that your struggles are, again, all your fault. If that’s coming up in you, that’s information. Notice how that old conditioning that serves capitalism and not life has got into you.

Healing starts with noticing what is here, right now. Not changing it, but noticing it. All of it, whether we like it or not. Sensing in and feeling what is true at this moment, then building enough space around what is true to be able to shift or change what comes next, if it serves your life or your kin’s life better than what you were doing/being before. Bringing your body to gravity, or as close to gravity as you can get, is to intentionally let this first relationship sniff around your life right now and share with you what it’s experiencing. Your early relationship with gravity help your cells remember themselves as they are and on their own terms.

Everything is information, including the physical message that might rise up in you that says it is not safe to rest. If trying to settle into weight and gravity makes every nerve ending in you scream that you have to get up and run, this is important knowledge. Bringing our body to this first reflex makes even more visible what our lives already know: what happens when we try to rest?

The first part of healing is stopping the violence. Always. That is true whether or not the violence is happening in the present moment or if the violence is held in the tissues, a moment in the past that hasn’t yet settled. Coming to this first reflex lifts up just how much of that present or past violence is impacting our ability to rest. As someone who spends time with bodies around how they are holding histories, I look at violence as a range

of things including the U.S. normative conditioning that says your worth is bound up with what you do and not who you are. None of us can be healed or free until all are healed and free. It is possible to stop the impact of the violence held in your tissues by controlling the space you are in and letting your body very slowly and fully feel that space around you, like a scared mammal slowly sniffing its way into someplace new, to find a hidden and quiet corner to curl up in. It is also possible to stop the impact of that violence in your tissues by being raised with a range of race, class, and gender privileges that conditions and numbs you to that violence even when it is screaming right outside your window. The first is about creating healing spaces. The second is about living your own life at the expense of others. Both of these scenarios are about violence that needs healing.

Coming to our first relationship with gravity, whether we do it by ourselves and for our individual bodies or we do it as part of a group, is always about taking a moment to listen, to integrate without thinking, and to notice what is true. Right now.

And like all things, this is about practice.

We can't build a practice of rest if we don't know how to rest. This is the place of contradiction, the tight knot that generations of living within and overriding violence have created. It is very difficult, although not impossible, to bring our body to gravity's weight if we don't believe we can let go of our weight.

The healing justice framework, as it has been taught to me, is not just about rest, although that is part of it. It is also looking and asking what is getting in the way of you, of your people, being able to trust gravity, to fall into your heaviness to rest? Because that which is getting in the way, whether active in the present moment or held as memory in your body, is what needs to change. And not just for you, but for your people, your neighbors, your enemies.

The gift of this is that gravity is not going anywhere. For the rest of your life and beyond, gravity is going to be this living, relational thing that is with you, wherever you are. It was there to greet you immediately upon being born and, after you pass, it will help pull your body down and back into your most basic elements. It is always here. And remembering your, our, relationship to it is something you can do on your own or, even better, with others. Nothing I am writing here is new. This is ancient knowledge,

and many healers and teachers across literally thousands of years have practiced what it means to bring a body back into its ability to rest. Rest is how life remembers itself, reflects over what it has learned, and slowly remakes itself in response to that learning. All of this is why systems of supremacy hijack the body's survival responses, keeping our nervous systems ready for disaster, unable to rest.

Even as the earth is shifting amid the sixth great extinction, even as we don't know what life will be like for generations to come, and even with what that raises in our bodies—this great unknowing and knowing—gravity is still here. Which is enough to support us to rest—and to help us push into action.

I wish for you the ability to rest. I wish for you, no matter what has happened in your life or is happening now, the space and time, for five seconds or five hours, to remember this first and very loyal relationship. Right now. After I finish writing this, I will practice. My daughter and partner are both still asleep. It is cold enough outside that the windows are shut so this room is quiet and contained. I will practice with and for you, remembering gravity and wishing its patient steady pull as a kindness that only wants to hold your bones so that you are contained, held still, not falling into space or falling apart.

# AT LEAST TWO LAYERS OF SUPPORT: AN ANATOMY OF COLLECTIVE CARE

I remember the first time I learned about the buddy system as a part of organizing. It was during a five-day training held by Training for Change, maybe twelve or thirteen years ago.<sup>1</sup> On the first day, they paired us up with someone and asked us to sit down with these partners, now called our “buddies.” We were invited to introduce ourselves and, when we were ready, share two specific things. The first was the ways we get in our own way, particularly when we want or long for something yet stop ourselves from achieving it. They gave us examples like self-doubt or freezing when there is conflict or waiting until seconds before a deadline. Then we were supposed to share the ways our buddy could support us when/if this happened. Support could mean knowing that we could call our buddy for help when we were stuck, or that our buddy could directly check in.

The practice was beautiful and very relieving. The facilitator shared that every one of us will do things that get in the way of achieving what we want, including our deep commitment to ending violence and building toward transformation. Along with the truth of systemic or structural barriers, these are the self-created barriers that prevent liberation.

I knew immediately how to answer the question of how I get in my own way. I stay in my head or I go too fast or I focus on how everyone else is doing rather than attending to what is happening within me. I withdraw and distance, studying things rather than being in them. I contract smaller when scared, isolating myself, rather than extending into risk. I forget to pause and notice what I am learning or experiencing, instead moving quickly on to the next thing. I move away from connection and toward isolation or duty when stressed and overwhelmed. This is pretty typical individualist conditioning.

I willingly told my buddy these things and then told them they could help me check in during breaks, match breaths with me, remind me to slow down, and help me pause and orient to the present. My buddy told me their obstacles, we hugged our consent out, and then mostly forgot how to show

up for each other during the rest of the training. Not out of malice, but because we were still learning to hold this layered attention: what is happening in front of us, what is happening within us, and what is happening within the body of the one we are looking out for. We didn't completely forget. We remembered in stutters. It was clear we both needed more practice.

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Our first world is a fluid world. Sperm meets egg and then rapidly moves through a series of complete changes before, at about two weeks, forming the home where we will spend the next thirty-six weeks. We emerge, slowly, while suspended in fluid within the amniotic sac. This sac itself is held within a uterus, a womb: our first home, our first experience of containment, of support. It is a support that has two layers, amniotic sac and womb. The sacredness of our life is held like this, with two kinds of soft containment.

In general, the body organizes everything this way. How this happens is not the same for all bodies. Some bodies, whether because of how they have been shaped or how they have been hurt, are glorious in their survival with only single layers in some places and double in others. We are always creative and complex.

Two layers, this gift of our ancestors, who comprise our evolution, asserts support as that important, that necessary for life. So important, that there are reinforcements. One balancing the other. Every support system has a support system. Every cushion has two layers. From the moment we begin to emerge within our first and fluid world.

The amniotic sac also has two layers. The outer layer, the chorion, is the toughest layer and it is magic. It supports the development of the placenta and is the tissue that helps the parent's blood nourish the fetus. Life blood nourishing life blood. The inner layer, the amnion, is a cellular matrix that cuddles, hugs, holds and most directly supports you, me, all of us as we move from egg-and-sperm to ready-to-be-born.

You can recall this, the feeling of it as an echo across your skin. Trust that feeling you have, even when it doesn't make immediate logic-brain sense.

This amnion is right up against your early fetal self, holding you closely, snugly. Imagine yourself tucked right in, that lovely feeling where all your

shapes merge with all the shapes around you. The amnion slowly expands, giving us more space as we grow, so that we can be feet and head pushing out against womb-wall, flicker kicks against skin. There is fluid between the two layers, there is fluid within and around us as we grow, there is fluid around the entire womb, a mix of fluid and membrane which is the body of the parent.

We leave them behind when we emerge into this world, a space of earth and air with fluid and fire woven throughout.

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When I gave birth to our daughter, I felt a lot of things. Silly sentence, of course I did. But one thing I felt was this: more adults than just my partner and I would be keeping track of her. Would know her. I prayed that within that tangle of attentive adults would be at least one person she felt safe enough with to talk to. I wanted to make sure that she did not disappear, at least not all the way. I hoped that, if anything horrible was happening to her, there were enough people watching that, even if she hid it well, someone might track the scent. I know how shame and abuse can make someone seek ways to hide the impact and present the front that says all is ok.

I knew that respecting a person's life boundaries, honoring sovereignty over control, means missing some things, but there would be enough people listening that something, please god, someone would notice what needed to be noticed. And people did, in a hundred small ways (and we still missed things). While all of this was happening, there were always at least two layers of support, of protection, because support and protection are largely the same thing: one membrane looks in (support) and one membrane looks out (protection). It's up to my daughter to decide if it is enough or too much. Depending on when that question is asked, the answer is likely to change. Just like mine does.

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Every cell in your body exists with the same two layers of support: the cellular membrane or the “skin” of each cell is made up of two layers. The outer membrane faces the outer world, assessing information, the life that is flowing through the interstitial fluid, the fluid of its out-there universe. This outer membrane decides what can come in and it shapes itself to accept this

outside-thing, this protein, oxygen, or fluid. Or it says, no, and the membrane stays closed. It also receives what is leaving from inside and releases it—bye amino acid, bye unneeded waste—floating out into the interstitial void. The inner membrane assesses what comes from the outside and receives what has passed through the outer membrane, a final check before letting it move into the inner space of mitochondria and nucleus. It takes what is ready to leave and shapes it so that it can move through and out.

Two layers of support, woven through every single cell of your body, right this second. See if you can feel that, just for a moment. This sense of two kinds of support, containment, protection and care with a fluid space between that is about movement and possibility.

Pause. Wait. Can you feel it? More than enough support.

Trees have an inner and outer bark. A plant has cuticle, upper epidermis and palisades, layers of its outside self-connected to its inside self. A turtle's shell has two layers. The inner layer is part of the skeleton and is fused to the ribs. The outer layer is formed from skin tissue and beneath their shell is the soft vulnerability of a body that is more fluid than hard.

And fish have scales and skin layers, the youngest aging and migrating up and out before being shed off into the surrounding ocean or stream. Unlike you and I, their skin is full of mucous membranes that make their outside self slippery, viscous, so they glide through the water rather than push against it when they swim. The fewer scales, the more mucus. The less mucus, the more scales.

Human skin has three layers with the same principles: the outermost engages with the outer world. It's waterproof, it contains the glory of melanin in varying degrees and it is part of the immune system, holding those cells that can rush in when there is a break in the skin, to fight infection. The middle layer is where the nerve endings live. It's where our body experiences pain and pleasure. It's also where the blood flow is, where we control temperature with sweat, where the skin cares for itself with oil.

This second layer is also where we release pheromones to communicate pleasure and pain to others. One of my favorite things is to put my nose right there, up against the crook where my partner's neck meets her shoulder. It makes her squirm and laugh but it's a test for me. Even when we are fighting or feeling disconnected, as long as she smells good to me,

and she always has, then we are still here, together.

Below these layers is the deeper, golden fat layer. This innermost layer of skin that keeps us warm and padded, keeps stores of energy, and connects our outside-listening skin to our inside body. Fat is also protection. What does it say about a people who turn this golden fluid, this sweet insulation that creates a single word out of support/protection into something to be eradicated, a sign of shame?

Always, at least two layers of support that provide both protection and connection, a relationship between the community of cells that is your specific body and the community of cells that is life on this earth, that *is* this earth.

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I remember my great-aunt telling me, and she made very fierce eye contact when she did, that blood is always thicker than water. You can't trust your friends, she said. They won't stay with you for the long term. It's your family that will always stay with you.

I was disrespectful, forgetting that she had probably survived things that made this true for her. I only looked at her as an old woman who knew nothing about me. She was from our family's first generation of children born in the U.S., raised in a family that sprawled across apartments and last names. By the time things got to my generation, that family was both frayed and assimilating. People were not kind to each other, in fact, many of them were violent. And that big circle fractured into smaller circles; love still moved through some, and others were filled with harm and resentment.

For my family, that inside layer of support did not have a second layer that was focused on love and respect, on dignity and care. The second circle that was there did not support us through economic and cultural struggle, through so many sons returning from the war without any place to put their rage and grief, and through the loss of community identities in the move toward globalization in the 1970s and 1980s. My family moved deeper toward whiteness as our second layer of support—Midwestern, hardworking whiteness. I think this is why my great-aunt told me not to trust anyone outside. She knew that what was outside was trying to suck away our inner lifeblood. She told me this even as she, herself, moved deeper into that overlap between German as culture and German-American

as white.

Dominance pretends it is the layer outside. It constantly decides who gets to stay in, who is out, and who is punished. Dominance chooses some to be its golden, bright children, wrapping its tight arms around that smallest of inside circles and saying, if you play by my rules, then you will be safe. Dominance doesn't like melanin or traditional ways or gender that doesn't support a binary story of hunt-and-submit reproduction. It doesn't matter how hard those outside the circle play by the rules; on a daily level, dominance is arbitrary.

Dominance sucks out the fluid between the layers and attaches itself, parasitic, to the inside layer.

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I first learned the principle that support precedes movement from Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen.<sup>2</sup> Anatomical physical support is what comes before the physical execution of a movement. Bend your arm at the elbow. Even before the muscle fibers begin to bind and stretch, loosening and tightening the ligaments that then move the bone, there is a movement of connective tissue, of muscle and of bone that acts as a kind of base, a foundation and support that precedes all movement. And each of those supportive processes has its own layers of support, and so on. At least two layers of support, and support precedes movement. The same is true for reflexes, for developmental stages, and much more. Our ancestors were wise and saw us becoming fully cooked through a series of steps, each one integrating to form the base for the next. That is what a lifetime is supposed to carry, a series of integrated experiences called wisdom, which open up space for the next growth to expand. Awkward, new, shaky but not toppling.

For movement to move and growth to emerge with ease and purpose, these two layers are a necessity, at the biological and the social levels.

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I am part of a project in the Twin Cities called Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP). We work from the place of building/supporting two overlapping circles. One circle focuses on honoring, deepening, and building interdependent intimate infrastructures of protection and support. Some call it pod mapping or collective care or mutual aid. It's the work of

moving into a community as a concrete commitment. Who do you call when you do not feel safe in your home? When someone you love has passed? When you are ill and can't feed yourself? What skills do you and your people need to support each other more thoroughly and to turn, together, to those outside your circle, to show up in moments of crisis or vulnerability? Mental health and first-aid training? De-escalation training? Living in collective homes? Raising and teaching children together? Growing old together? Caring for those we love who are vulnerable together? Who do you celebrate with, who do you grieve with? Who sits alongside you as you wonder-plan about how climate change will impact your grandchildren and pushes with you as you wonder what you can do for them right now? Who is going to love you hard and hold you accountable when you are falling short on something you said you would do? Who is going to remember you and love you clear when someone else is naming the harm you have caused? Who is going to remember you when you are having a hard time remembering yourself?

Infrastructure like this can show up naturally, organically, when you are part of a community or group that is under attack economically, culturally, or physically. It doesn't always last when the attack has ended, though sometimes it does. This depends on what kind of culture holds you.

Infrastructure like this also doesn't show up as often when people are protected enough to have closed off, private homes and lives. All systems of dominance depend on a binary brain; those who are safe, those who are not. Those who have, those who don't. Those who are deserving, those who are not. A profit-based system can only have a small group in the most protected category. Some of us have to relearn what it is to trust other people to hold us and remember us in the most intimate of ways. Others of us come from people and experiences who never forgot.

The work of the first circle is making these conversations explicit and direct. Helping create strategies and plans and stories—consensual, emergent, intimate.

With this first circle we say, here is the innermost membrane. With those inside this membrane, we agree to show up at 2am when there is a bat flying around your bedroom, and to stay over time. We commit to be there, even when you are in a crappy mood, to keep learning together. I am almost sixty, still young but experiencing the savor of thirty- and almost-forty-year

friendships. I wish for you many years of living with people who keep remembering who you are, even as you change and get lost and come home again.

The second overlapping circle is the one that asks: what do you do when none of the close-in relationships are available or can hold this moment of crisis or vulnerability? When what is held and known inside the membrane isn't enough to meet this moment? Who can you call who you trust will hold you with love and respect as you move to whatever next step of support is needed? This is where we are working to support and train people who are able to respond to a phone call for help around a specific issue or experience. When you call, it is likely we don't know you, we have never sat inside your home and had coffee, but that doesn't prevent us from showing up with love. It's a different level of intimacy, a different shape of care and respect.

These are two circles of support. The first circle is those who know you, who already claim you, who remember your life. This is the circle of looking in and support. The second circle is the circle of looking out; the circle of calling someone who does not know you, who is not in your life. This is protection. None of this an individual thing, it is collective. In the broadest sense, we got you. There are different vulnerabilities with each layer of support. There are different needs for supporting each layer of support, but collective safety does not exist without both of them.

For the past few years, this work has been filling me, lifting me. But our organization is new. We are still in those early stages where vision and emerging structure are sending out early tendrils of practice. We look at each other and say, we are here, committed to each other and this work, for at least ten years. Please don't ask us if this "works" or is "effective" until ten years have passed. We claim the right to time.



I need these maps. Something concrete to help find my way from isolation to abundant connection. I look toward the communities of cells, plants, birds, and crawling things. Two layers of support, how an ant colony emerges, how a nest is built, whales and barnacles.

Two layers of support is the connective tissue between an individual life and a larger collective web of mutual aid, of community. Not just between

and among people, but between and among life. Outside our capacity to name and see it, collective care emerges, too big to grasp, too much to fit on a single map. So we start with what we can see and what we can touch, this foundation, these two layers of support. One close up and intimate, the other connecting us to everything.

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1. To learn more about Training for Change, visit their website at [trainingforchange.org](http://trainingforchange.org).
2. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's work, including links to her books and videos, can be found at [bodymindcentering.com/about/bonnie-bainbridge-cohen](http://bodymindcentering.com/about/bonnie-bainbridge-cohen).

# ON REST AND BEING PART OF A PACK

Humans are like coyotes. Coyotes are like humans. We have both learned how to survive as part of a pack and as lone individuals. We are both able to move back and forth between sharing power with members of a group and navigating the world alone. Coyotes and humans do this without diminishing our ability to survive. This is not true for all mammals. Most mammals are more heavily conditioned for one or the other. This means that, in moments of crisis, most mammals either depend on survival through a pack or strike out on their own. They can't switch back and forth. Coyotes have also figured out, like raccoons, foxes, and deer, how to thrive among the chaotic disruption of human urbanization and change. Coyotes are cool.

We are okay with a group and we are okay alone. Not okay as in how it feels, but okay as in able to survive. We make instinctive choices based on the context around us. We make choices based on what we have been taught or have experienced that makes us lean more toward connection with others or look for our own way.

While we can survive in both ways, they do not mix or match. Our ancestors were wiser than that. They shared forward a range of strategies to survive and thrive that work best in different situations. They practiced this over and over again, as it became instinct. And we are each born with these instincts, curled up in our cells and waiting to unfurl. As we grow up, those instincts can get overridden by culture or by violence or by a host of other things. Overridden does not mean disappeared. The instincts are still there, deeper and older; a gift from all those relatives who lived before. Healing, coming home, coming more deeply into our connected lives, helps those instincts sit up and pay attention again. Coyotes, like humans, when under great stress and overwhelm, will leave their pack and scatter across the land as lone individuals or in pairs. Like coyotes, we can scatter from the collective, go it on our own. In these moments of crisis and high intensity, if there is no one else around, our bodies will still work, our brains will still think, and we have the capacity to find our way through impossible times. On the other side of impossible times is the possibility of rest. This is not the best way to survive—except when it is the best way to survive.

To survive means to rest. We share the instinct to rest with pretty much every living thing. To rest is to not act. It is to *not* think, move, protect, forage, find, fight, flee, or even feel much. To rest is to let other important systems, like the glial system, come online and clear away the excess that makes our brain weary, our thoughts feel stagnant. When we are truly deeply hurt, resting can mean being able to crawl away to someplace warm and safe, a womb-like burrow, and rest, with minimal stimulation, so that our bodies can focus on healing. Lizards and snakes do this. They lower their body temperatures so that they can lie dormant, not needing much food or water until they are well. This can take days, weeks, sometimes months. Then they wake up again and move out into the world. The poetry of evolution tells us that lizards are our ancestors, our kin, and that the oldest part of our brain is what we developed when we were coldblooded, just-out-of-the-water creatures. So we can still find a burrow or a hot stone and go our-kind-of-dormant. But as warmbloods, we can't do this on our own, no matter how well we are hidden. We can't shut off our digestion completely, although we can slow it down. We need others around us so that we can rest. We need fuel to keep going, even when we slow down, even when we are mostly sleeping, or weeping. When we are overwhelmed and licking our wounds, we need someone to watch over us so that we can rest, so that we can eat and take a shit and come back to rest again. To be fully vulnerable, life-vulnerable, we have to connect to someone else, preferably more than one, with a few spares. This is why we evolved packs.

We need a pack when we have young ones among us, when we have elders among us, when we have any body that is somewhat dependent for its own survival. We need a pack when we have to find food or create a home or any of the things we need to keep our warm-blooded bodies safe from freezing temperatures. A pack exists to circle up and protect, to share the care and watching of each other. It lets us be vulnerable in ways that are difficult when we are on our own. Eight hundred thousand years of evolution have winnowed out the survival possibilities and ended up pretty clear: for our species, for us mammals, most of the time it is best to not go it alone.

In my practice, as well as in my life, I know many people who have been deeply harmed by their packs; who are figuring out, on their own, how to feel alive again. They are hungry for a pack. They want that burrow and

they want to be curled up, safe and resting, in the back. One of my friends and mentors, a somatics practitioner, has said for years that she wants to hold an open space where people of color, queers, and transfolk, those who have experienced significant violence, those who *still* experience violence can come and just rest. Together. Supported rest, with all of the cushions and blankets and gentle teachings that help a high-end nervous system unwind back into gravity. Like all things body-based, we can only learn these things by practicing them. There is nothing abstract about rest. It is physical. We can't think our way to it.

Like us, coyotes are predators. Like many of us, a coyote is a predator with other predators impacting her liberation. Coyote is all about shift and change. Coyotes have shifted and changed their sleeping habits in order to navigate around human cycles. Coyote mostly sleeps during the day, looking for hidden places to rest. Sometimes, when few other predators are around, coyotes will sleep in more open spaces like high grasses or the shadows under a tree. Coyote rests every time there is a chance, going into deep sleep for small periods and then waking up to sense the air before going into deep sleep again. Coyote rests and the coyote community is increasing.

Since the early nineteenth century, U.S. federal policy has often looked toward the extermination of coyotes. In the 1930s, the U.S. government paid \$10 million to something called the Eradication Methods Laboratory to come up with new kinds of poison and new killing methods, all focused on disappearing coyotes.<sup>1</sup> Even today, around half a million coyotes are killed each year, many shot to death by ranchers from small planes and helicopters. Yet the coyote survives. The coyote thrives. In the early nineteenth century, coyotes only lived west of the Rockies. Now coyote lives from sea to shining sea. There are coyotes in New York, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, and Minneapolis. I have seen them here in the city.

Coyotes, like humans, can shift and change how they sleep, how they eat, if they travel alone or together, in order to survive. They remake themselves, surviving attempted genocide, surviving the destruction and recreation of their habitat, surviving the winnowing down of competitive predators to, most of the time, us and them. Here is what comes first: the protection of the pack and the right to go solo when that is the best chance of survival. Here is what comes first: finding new corners and spaces where

there is rest amidst the chaos of city cars and daytime drama.

After almost twenty years of a bodywork practice, what I notice most is that the bodies that come to me are more tired. More deeply tired. I talk with bodyworkers who have been in practice for forty or fifty years and they reflect that, back in the day, when people came to get care, the changes and shifts in their bodies went deeper and lasted longer. They say the same thing: people are more tired now. This is a through-line that weaves across gender, class, culture, race, and other kinds of life experience. This is a through-line of exhaustion, of too much getting too much-er. This is a through-line, even as some of our beloved bodies, those whose people have been targeted for a long time, are feeling this present exhaustion on top of the exhaustion of their specific people and experiences.

Who is your pack? Who is the person, who are the people, who are the trees and the rivers that, when they are nearby, help you to rest? How do you center rest, for yourself and your people, as one of the ways to hang out? Not doing, not working, not creating or making or moving or shaking, but resting, resting, resting? I am writing this piece, not because I have already learned how to do it, but because I have to learn how to do it.

Rest is not about rest, it is about the context that surrounds rest. It is about state violence and the culture of surveillance, about the hours you have to work to pay rent or chip away at your mortgage. Rest is about how unfinished histories hide behind our eyelids and the fact that healthcare usually means the opposite of rest. We need packs. We cannot rest alone. What is most important—why we are here—is this: we are here because we take turns.

We take turns. Like coyote, we find different places to sleep, alone, together.

Who is your pack who keeps watch while you shut your eyes?

And now rest.

And then watch the door, watch the clock, watch the kids, get the food, make the food, so that someone else can shut their eyes, too.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The Eradication Methods Laboratory is discussed in Dan Flores, *Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 98. For the funding reference see page 109.

2. It's not possible to talk about rest without honoring the work of Tricia Hersey and the Nap Ministry. See: [thenapministry.wordpress.com](http://thenapministry.wordpress.com).

# HOW OUR BODIES READ THE AIR

Before you start reading, pause. Sink in. Notice your breath.

I am sitting at home, in the midst of a canceled day. Yesterday, out of the blue, my lungs started to get tight. Not asthma-tight, but germ-tight. Something was going on in the deep inside that was particularly interested in that place between diaphragm and back-of-the-throat. Husky coughing. Gravel voice. And this morning, no voice and a wavering cough. This week, I've been asked to do a teaching; a presentation on breath for a group of people who work with those who sometimes lose their breath because of illness. These things are sitting next to each other as I look out the window. I am not feeling my whole body sick, but when I move too much, I can feel my lungs having less oxygen for gulping.

Every resource we have—from the food we eat to the oil we pump out of the ground to the wood that is used to build our homes as well as to laboratory-created plastics and microfibers—exists because of a dance between sunlight and oxygen. It's daylight where I am, even as the days are growing shorter and the leaves are falling off the trees, and still, I know that elsewhere on this planet, the leaves on trees, the algae in the sea, the moss crawling damp on a forest floor, are all zip-zinging breaths of oxygen into the air. And, because the air is an ocean that washes and tide-circles the planet, that oxygen moves its way toward my unthinking inhale.

Go ahead, breathe. Kapok, xate, *ipê*, diatom, phytoplankton, baby tooth, rounded tongue, and hammered shield moss, thank you.

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When I was six, and he was four, my brother drowned. Like my brother, I ended up in the water, a muddy industrial river. My memory has me high in the sky, flying out of our car as it jumped the bridge, then coming to, deep below water, floating, muddy and swirled. A voice—I always say it's the first time I heard spirit—tells me to swim, swim, swim to the light. But I don't know how to swim in water over my head. It's too deep, I say. And spirit tells me, love in their voice: it's simple, you just look toward the light and fly. And so I did, and that was joy.

The river bank our car crashed against isn't even a real river bank. The Little Calumet River was created through dredging and rerouting, natural water becoming an earth-held pipeline between Gary and south Chicago. It carries waste from the factory floor straight south toward the Mississippi and north to Lake Michigan. A remarkable thing about this river is that it flows in both directions, changing sometimes for no reason we can explain. We don't understand what happens when a river so severely abused tries desperately to flee its own banks.

There is an environmental report on that river from 1965, five years before my family broke apart on the river bank. Gas and oil, untreated sewage, ammonia, and cyanide are named along with pages and pages of chemicals. In 1970, my family merged with the river, my brother and I floating, floating through the water, his life drifting away and then gone. Once back on land and no longer joy-floating in water like air, I harsh-gasped, the fluids in this open-air pipeline trading with the oxygen in my lungs. To cry for help you need to inhale so that you can exhale sound. A breath held too long is silence.

Water breathes. In and out, deepness just below the tidal pull. In 2008, the Little Calumet flooded its banks and all of the land surrounding the river was declared a federal disaster area. Sometimes, a river, so severely abused, breath long held stagnant and unmoving, will find a way to exhale. My brother's breath trapped so many years ago is mixed with the oxygen and hydrogen that makes up that river water. An exhale is needed before you can sharply inhale the sounds that come back out as a cry.

Now breathe.

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For every one of you reading this who does not have access to your breath as an unthinking thing, I am writing this as a prayer to your inhale and your exhale. If you are using machines to help that inhale and exhale happen, then this is a spark of love along the electric lines to keep that juice flowing. If you breathe without a machine but your breath is not a safe thing, reacting to the things others smoke or off-gas into the air, then I send prayer like bubbles, oxygen pure, from the forests of before. I have so many loved ones who are lungs-tight in life, who began that way as children, who live that way now. Over the last few years, we have lost so many, as I write this

we just passed the one million mark of people who have died, lungs overwhelmed, by the impact of COVID. Lungs-tight, the constriction response to a world in overwhelm, too much crap in the air, too much harm to kin generations back still flowing to the now, the eyes of the state keeping watch—grief clogging the channels where the air wants to come in.

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The air is always cooler when you lean against a tree, a little circle of something else, something sweeter. The older, the leafier the tree, the more true it is. When I leave the city and spend time where there are lots of trees, I get sleepy. My body has to slow down, the way it does after a really big meal, taking a bit more energy to get used to digesting this wonder. After a while, everything inside just gets more sparkly.

I once heard an elder explain that we would not recognize the air of 50,000 or even 5,000 years ago. It was just more ... more full of itself. We were different then. I think our bodies have adjusted. They had to. The last time the atmosphere carried the amount of carbon dioxide it carries now, we didn't yet exist.

There is a reason why factories that push pollution into air and water are usually built in poorer and mostly Blacker and Browner neighborhoods. The air has not consented to this.

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Breathe, tight or loose, just breathe. This is your birthright.

When we first begin, wee bud emerging as cells go from one to two to organs and limbs and the cover of skin, our lungs are practicing, moving fluid in and out—giggle gulp—respiratory muscles, fluid stretching. We are fish but we are not. We are born and the umbilical cord is cut and carbon dioxide rapidly builds in our system—we're talking nanoseconds—until the air-instinct kicks in and we take that first hungry gulp of oxygen. Just like that, our respiratory system is on line. We breathe air instead of water. Thank you, ancestors.

Now pause. Set this book down and put your hands at the bottom of your rib cage, at the top of your belly. This is, more or less, where the bottom of your lungs are, lower down on the right, higher up on the left because every part of our body needs to make way for the heart. You might cup your

hands, as though the bottom lobes of your lungs are resting there, bigger-smaller, expanding-contracting, as you notice them. Maybe your lungs, like many of us, will quiver with joy if you send them a bit of love and care. Try it and see.

Now bring your hands up to your collar bones. Press your fingers down lightly just behind the bone itself. Your fingers will slide into a hollow, a slightly softer place; the shape of it varies by how much fat you were gifted with. This, oh curious fingers, just a wee bit below the surface of skin, is the top of your lungs. Not the whole span of your collar bones, but somewhere around the middle, right there, is the very top. The first time someone told me this, I was surprised. They're so *big!* Love zap those bundles of tissue and air, if you're open to it, top to bottom and back again, whether breath comes with ease or is a struggle, they are here, these lungs of yours, and so you are here, too.

One more thing, if you are sitting in a chair, rest against its back. If you are standing, put your back against a wall. Most of us think of our lungs in a front-body way, because we tend to be front-bodied people. It's where our eyes are and, since most of us are sighted, this front facing vision ends up defining what we pay attention to. Most of our lungs, though, are in our back body. Take a look at someone's profile and notice how much more of their torso is in a curve behind. The rib cage and muscle is a shell of protection over the part that we can't easily see. Within that shell are a whole lot of the lungs. Our front, too, of course, all huffing and puffing across the density that is our torso. Zap those lungs with love by sending breath to the back and then send breath to the front, and back and front again. First rule for everything I write: only do this if it gives you pleasure.

Again breathe, tight or loose, just breathe. This is our birthright.

The lungs are called *xan* in Khoisan, the language spoken by those who are likely our oldest ancestors, who first began to breathe as a species, in the southern part of what we now call Africa. Here is what the lungs, the gift these ancestors gave us, can do: 3,000 gallons of air, each and every day, traveling through 14,900 miles of airways in your body. These numbers are scientific measurements, but there is something magical about this folding and unfolding of physical space so that something your hands can span also contains six and a half Mississippi River lengths, three-fifths of the distance around the earth. All of this, right there, in the sacred glory of

your inside. Around these 14,900 miles of the smallest to the largest of airways, there is blood; there are capillaries, vessels, and arteries, an intimate kiss between air and fluid so that oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange, through the thinnest of membranes. With thousands of miles of practice, molecules pass back and forth, to clean and be cleaned, to nourish and be nourished. Inhale. Exhale.

There is more. Taking the too-cold air and bringing it to warm, taking the too hot and settling it to cool, our bodies spread from the beginning place of African savannah, our lungs adapted. Becoming lung, learning how to be steady and strong when breathing the air that is full of ocean, deep-forest, dry sands, high mountains, wind, and no wind. Our lungs dance the seasons, working to keep us 98.6 degrees even when it's minus thirty outside. They filter what is dangerous on the breeze, as much as they can before they are overwhelmed. They are here to keep our bodies from becoming too acidic, and to keep the information flowing through our mouth and nose, our smelling and tasting that knows the difference between dangerous and yummy.

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And now another breath. Focus on the exhale and shape it into a "no." Push out what is not your life. Inhale again, bring it in deep, as deep as you can (remember my first rule). Now, turn that breath around and let the enormity of 14,900 miles of space saying, "no, not this." Exhale with a sound, a groan. Make it loud, and let it tumble toward the ground, where it will soak, like acid rain filtered by the truth of soil into something sweet. This is a real practice, a physical practice, a clearing breath, a way of letting millions of tiny cilia, push out what is not needed, not wanted—toxins on microscopic particles, the sediment of microaggressions, the micro murmur of a million moments of grief, disgust, panic, or pain. Loud and ragged and strong, we exhale.

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I started hearing this piece lying in the bed one morning, each cough making trachea, bronchi, bronchioles, alveoli felt and known. Cough and here is the tightness, the span of tissue wanting to be free. Hours later, my breath is a bit looser, although I am tired. Someone I used to spend a lot of

time with would say, often and like a prayer, every cell only has three seconds of oxygen and yet still it lives, trusting that more oxygen will come.

We live in times where breath is even more precious; sometimes endangered.

Eric Garner, remember his name, who shouted, then whispered, “I can’t breathe,” while being murdered by a police officer in New York. George Floyd said the same thing on a corner, eight blocks from where I am writing this. He said it more than twenty times.

With climate change, there is already oxygen decrease in the oceans and the skies.

Now breathe...

I am not going to end this essay. It is written like breathing, from the deep to the shallow, and my breaths are not done. Instead, I’ll slow down like this, each keystroke being the rhythm of inhale...

And out...

And in...

# PLEASE DON'T CALL YOURSELF AN EMPATH

A few years ago, I had a bodywork experience that, for a few days, completely changed how I experienced life. I was receiving bodywork from someone else. The session felt like a clearing, one of the most spiritual body experiences I have yet had. After it, I could see cells. Literal physical cellular structures throughout the body. Vibrating, living, expanding, contracting. This lasted for three or four days, but during that time, when I sat across from someone in the bodywork room and directed my attention to some part of their physical body, their tissues would become translucent. I could see the cells moving, see where the restriction was, where blood or lymph was not flowing. It was as clear as the image of this page. I knew exactly where to touch, what kind of touch, and when to let go. This wasn't because I was suddenly smarter. It was because I could hear/see/sense the person's body more fully.

I had taken no drugs. I had not fasted or made any special prayers or learned any new techniques. Instead, I had received a bodywork session that felt as though a whole bunch of shit had just cleared out of my system, as if whatever is usually in the way of this seeing was, for a moment, no longer there.

I shared what was happening with a friend; a healer who teaches me. I shared what was happening with an elder; someone I deeply respect. They both said the same thing, "Susan, there is nothing unusual about what you are describing. This kind of thing is happening all of the time. It is happening right now. The only problem is that we have forgotten how to feel it. We are the ones in the way of this kind of connection. This is what systems of oppression and dominance are set up to prevent; it's what we have to wade through and change to find our way back to life."

After a few days, this vision faded back to where my eyes see only the skin, though touch and sensing can sometimes experience more. But it's still there: the feeling and memory of it, the knowledge of it. It has set the bar for me. Whether or not I ever experience that again this lifetime, I've

got my sights set on my children's children living with this kind of normal.

It also matters that it came after a bodywork session, like a tide moving in, and that it then receded after a few days. It makes me think of how a lot of change work happens. We create the conditions for something deeper to emerge, something that gives us a sense of what is possible. And then, often, much of it shifts back. There is no such thing as individual healing or individual change. Each single moment is dependent on everything it is connected to.

There are a lot of people I come across, in person and online, who self-identify as an empath. Usually, I find out because the person says something like: "As an empath..." or "This is too much for me/overwhelming/too intense because I am an empath." According to the thousands of sites that "empath" brings up on a Google search, an empath is someone who can psychically tune into the emotional experience of a person, an animal, or a plant. It means being affected by other people's energies and being attuned to their inner lives. It means that you feel and want to respond to suffering.

There is nothing special about sensing and feeling things. This is the connection that is there, waiting for us, always in the background and sometimes, illuminatingly, in the foreground. It is not an identity, not a struggle, not a burden that some people have to bear. It's about being alive.

I notice three different emotional tinges from people who I hear self-identify as empaths. One is neutral. These people are just naming something that might help us to understand what is going on for them and empath is the only word they have to name it. It doesn't mean anything other than, yes, I feel things that are not always visible.

Sadly, this is not the emotional tinge that I most often feel when someone is naming themselves as "empath." Most often, I either sense a kind of overwhelm, the feeling of a burden that has to be carried, something that others who are not empaths would not understand. The other tinge I hear is self-righteousness as in, I know this because I am an empath, implied that if you are not an empath, again, you would not understand. Sometimes both tinges show up in the same body as it proclaims this identity, sometimes only one or the other. It's hard for me to hear this outside of the cultural shaping of U.S. exceptionalism. As old as the American Revolution, it's the story that there is something unique and unusual about the United States.

The first free country, the most compassionate, the first full democracy, and on and on. The more generations your people have been here, the more likely this belief system, woven together with the perfectionist individualism of racial capitalism, is somewhere inside you, guiding the levers of your thoughts.

A number of years before the experience of seeing cells, a friend of mine pulled me up short. She reflected on how, when we were talking together, I had started to respond to her thoughts before she named them. After a few back and forths of figuring out what was happening, she called me out. An important nuance here: this beloved friend is Lakota and was raised in a daily culture where none of this way of sensing information is seen as odd or unusual. It's not the funky weirdness that Western scientific-method culture makes it out to be. Instead, speaking with ancestors and spirits, hearing on more levels than with our ears: this is part of what it means to be alive and connected. For her, there are cultural protocols and practices that have evolved to make sure people are in right relationship to each other while they are hearing or sensing the things that are not being said. It is not appropriate to listen to someone else's inside-life just because you are able to. My friend pulled me up and called me out because, she shared, I was mis-using my power. It's not right, she said. You could hurt someone else and you could hurt yourself. You need to learn boundaries and consent, when it's okay to sense in deeper and when it is not your business.

Sensing the feelings, the life force, the thoughts, the pulse of another person, another relative like a plant or an animal, is not supposed to overwhelm you on a daily basis. It's also not supposed to be something that gives you the power to "know more" than those around you. It's not supposed to be a burden, a drain, or an insight that makes you special in the most capitalist sense. It's just tuning in to a part of life that is always there. We don't and won't all do it the same way but sensing these things is just another way of being alive. Many of us, and very likely you reading this, were not raised with good behavior. We were not raised to be in right relationship with life around us, to feel that deep underlying connection, and to then know how to be polite and respectful with those lives we feel.

This looks one way for folks who are healing practitioners or people working in the spiritual and ancestral realms. It looks different for care workers who can read nervous systems or have training and information

about what might be happening in someone's body. It looks different again for organizers who move into spaces where they, as an organizer, have access to all kinds of resources and information that the people they are working with don't have. The question is always, how do we use what we have, not for our own gain, but for the collective connectedness that is about belonging to each other?

Most people reading this were not brought up with cultural practices and protocols for dealing with the information that comes from life around us. Sometimes it is overwhelming. Sometimes we do get a download that can knock us off center. But this is not the norm; this is just sometimes. This is where I sit on the couch and turn toward you, potentially a bit too intense as I think this through with you.

Dear beloveds who call yourselves empaths—or a healer or a conduit for spirits—do you feel it as something that takes energy away from you, that makes you exhausted and unable to be in the chaotic mix of real people in real time, whether with a group or just one person? What if what you are naming as “empathic” stems from the impact of trauma. Highly activated trauma is like a parallel stream to feeling the deep life connection of all things. Highly activated trauma means that we can get quickly overwhelmed by the stimulus of other people's feelings. Literally, our emotional physical selves are full. We are carrying too much around inside and so we can't take on anything else. Feelings and sensations, stimuli from outside, start to feel like blaring foghorns that make our heads ache, our bodies recoil, and our energy deplete. Elements of this are USA-normal, as life here gets faster with more people needing to work more hours in order to make ends meet. It is more shared than not, with stimuli coming hyper-fast via the electronic signals of a planet with a low-grade fever that's not going down. And elements of this are not specific to U.S. culture. They are what happens to a body that experienced too much when younger (or in generations past) and did not have the space, time, and support to process that “too much” so that it could be integrated and turned into wisdom.

There is something so deeply capitalist, so intensely supremacist, about turning the normalcy of life connecting with life into something special, something unique, that gets traded as a kind of elitism. There is something so dangerous about turning this experience of connection into something fragile, something that has to be protected: the overwhelmed, deeply

spiritual empath in our midst.

There is nothing unusual about feeling the suffering (or glory) of another life. This is how we are designed, to live in intimate relationship with all life around us. This doesn't mean we are naturally kind or caring or attentive to that life. It only means that we are designed to be intimate with other life forms. To be attuned to them. To feel their attunement to us. To feel them, their joy and suffering, their presence and absence. This is why we have to learn ways to hold this information, to be in right relationship to the life around us. This is also why we have to heal, to get the support we need to integrate the trauma we carry so that we are not in a feedback loop of overwhelm so that, in order to survive, we have to separate ourselves from the rampant expression of life.

This is also why we have to end the systems of domination held within our bodies and within the institutions around us. Domination culture is going to keep ramping up the trauma individually and collectively. It is how these systems function. They focus on Black, Indigenous, immigrant, fem, fat, queer, nonbinary, disabled, poor, and crazy bodies, surveilling, controlling, and tracking them, while also numbing out those who are the descendants of oppressors so that they can't or won't be aware this is happening, or will even fight against the awareness and knowing.

Please don't call yourself an empath as though this makes you different from others around you. Instead, notice that you are feeling the life around you. And then ask, for what purpose am I feeling this? What stories and projections am I bringing to these feelings? If I am overwhelmed, why am I overwhelmed? What is not finished inside of me, what needs care and support, so that I can come back to sensing life around me as a gift rather than an act of harm?

Someone in a bodywork session with me recently called themselves an empath. The intensity of what they experience from other people, they explained, made it difficult to be in large groups. I had heard this before and so I asked them if we could go deep with this, rather than just assume that this was some essential quality they had, something that could not change. They said yes, so I asked questions. They listened to their body. They listened to these sensations and feelings that they were picking up from others and what came up as they sat there was grief. Deep, gut wrenching grief, about their life and the lives of people around them.

We are all empaths, as are the oaks and willows, the bees and salamanders, the air we breathe and the water that breathes us. We all need to learn how to be in right relationship to this mix of life, learning that lasts our entire lives. This is true even if we are born into cultures that are there to teach us—we still have to learn. We badly need to end, resolve, or integrate everything that is getting in the way of this, from domination culture to targeted acts of individual violence by family and kin.

As long as we cannot resolve these things or be in right relationship with the partial knowledge we do have, we will continue to destroy the earth—even as the earth is, without confusion, feeling us, responding to us, sensing us, when we can't do the same in return.

*[Of all of the pieces I have written and posted on my blog, the original version of this piece has traveled the most. Over 120,000 people reading it and sometimes sending me pissed off notes and emails about it and other times sending gratitude. The way this piece has traveled makes me as curious as the fact that life is aware of life, even when there are things that get in the way of feeling it.]*

## LISTENING: THREE OR MORE BRAINS

*I am going to share a teaching with you, something I learned from Suzanne River through her program, Global Somatics.<sup>1</sup> The program no longer exists. And Suzanne is no longer here. She passed away in 2015. I started writing this piece a few days after February 17th, the anniversary of her passing. Suzanne had a stroke and almost moved on, but then she came back for a final year or two. She came back and finished working with her last cohort of students, teaching from her bed and moving them to graduation and beyond. I was not there when she moved on.*

*I had started to disappear before she had her stroke. My mind made up all kinds of perfectly reasonable explanations for why I left. They weren't wrong—but they weren't the whole story. What I didn't do was sit down with her and let myself shake and be afraid and angry and confused and just say to her: I don't like you when you act in this or that way. This hurts me. Instead, I disappeared. When she had her stroke, most of her other students, including those who struggled with her in similar ways, went to her. I did not. Again, my mind made up a lot of justifiable reasons; how she had treated a beloved trans friend, how she was around race and Indigeneity, how she was around power. They were, of course, all justifiable based upon my politics and various belief systems. I would like to say that part of me felt guilty or unsettled, that some place deep within me was raising its eyebrows when I wasn't showing up, but that wasn't true. I mostly felt nothing except when I reminded myself why I wasn't at her side, why I had left. When that happened, I just felt hard. Belly-hard. Heart-hard. But brain-fluid. My brain could spin and dance, explaining in ever greater complexity, so that I fully convinced myself that my leaving was justified. When she passed, shared loved ones asked if I needed a ride to the funeral. If I was going to her ceremony. I stayed hard inside. Unforgiving. I felt justified in withholding my love.*

*It was several years ago when that hard place in me started to soften. It was slow, not a quick spring but a seep. There are so many mind-words I could share here, understanding about why I did what I did, stories about how the past became tangled with the present, but those stories don't really*

*matter. No matter what, I left. I disappeared while she was dying. It doesn't matter if she missed me (I know she did, even if in the smallest of ways). It doesn't matter if she was angry at me or understanding. What matters is this: I behaved in ways that contradict my deepest sense of what it is to be human. This softening continued until one day, a few years ago, my partner and I came home and our dog had taken one of Suzanne's gifts to me and torn it to shreds. A wooden rattle, chewed into pieces on our bedroom floor. I went into shock, grabbing this gift, and finally, at that moment, the grief came. All of it. Hot and cold, fast and slow, too much for my brain to create stories that would take the edge off—it just came through and I sobbed and sobbed. Afterwards, I felt sad but I felt connected to her again. Grateful. I prayed to her. I told her a version of what I am writing here, my deep regret at not being there, my sorrow at the things I had experienced in the past that made me so terrified in her present. And then I put a photo of her on my altar and when I see it, there is sweetness.*

*This piece had been living in me for weeks before I sat down to write. I noticed that it was the anniversary of her passing and I giggled, knowing that this was a hand-off, a blessing, and an invitation. It is not a small thing to directly share a teacher's teachings. There has to be a relationship there, something that we connect to that says, I learned this, this person shaped me this way and now I am sharing it with you. The paragraphs I just wrote flowed out of me without plan, without thinking. And as I felt them move through, I thought: of course this is the story that has to be at the front of this piece. It isn't enough to say that this is written in her honor. She deserves, and I deserve, more than that.*

*And so, this piece is written with deep gratitude for Suzanne River and who she was in my life. I write it without forgetting the ways that I was angry at her and hurt. I write it without forgetting the ways that I disappeared and got hard. I write it while feeling my thankfulness at how she shaped me. This is the whole story of a relationship and it is also the story of getting lost in one brain instead of living in all three.*

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Western medicine didn't always believe that the brain in our skull is the center of all knowing. Until Galen showed up in the second century, the medical systems that eventually became Western medicine saw treating the

body as a practice of balancing the humors. What was originally an elemental approach to care, in which the humors were as much about the land and context around the body as what was happening within an individual self, slowly became more diagnostic and focused on the isolated body.

Western medicine and Western culture evolved together. As knowing things became more important than experiencing things, as individual knowledge was centered over collective knowing, so did Western understanding of anatomy respond. The rational mind—which could justify things like slavery and genocide—took precedence over the gut-mind and the heart-mind and their contradicting messages.

What we call a brain is a place where a lot of information comes together and responses are determined. It's the connecting place of many different relationships. If you are Western-trained, then you are trained in school and elsewhere to pay specific attention to how the brain in your skull assesses information and creates responses. Bodies are schooled to sit in chairs, direct their eyes to the teacher, and receive and store information. Even with today's focus on social and emotional learning, the educational standards of each state focus more on the content of information than the experience of it.

I love the brain in my skull. I couldn't live without it. It has a specific role, bringing information in through the nervous system and other sorts of body-listenings, and then determining actions or inactions. It is worth listening to all of the brain's voices and all the different ways it works. There is no "normal" way of receiving and assessing information, although the overculture tries to train us into a single brain way of being. Hello neurodivergent loves, I see you.

For many generations, Western ways of knowing, like other cultural ways of knowing, centered the heart-brain more than the head-brain. It matters, embryologically, that the heart- and head-brain were physically connected at the start of our emergence, before separating and spiraling away from each other. The heart-brain, which is not just the heart-organ but includes the thymus, the pericardium and really, as a side note, probably the lungs as well, is one of the places where information from many aspects of the body comes together and choices are made. The head-brain is about making sense of things, a kind of executive function in relation to our survival and

to our sense of the future and to our capacity for pleasure. The heart-brain does the same, only in relation to the ways we connect and nourish and are nourished.

The head-brain and the heart-brain do the same things, but they are not the same. Just as we can communicate the same concept in four different languages and we supposedly are saying the same thing, emotion and thought are not that different, except when they are.

And then there is the gut-brain, this universe of microbiota and cells, human and nonhuman living together in harmony, or not. The gut-brain is the oldest brain in our bodies—it learned how to be alive in our ancestor organisms generations before the heart-brain and head-brain became complex systems. It is so old and so important that, even when the head-brain and the heart-brain need machines to keep them functioning, the gut-brain will extract nourishment from food to keep the whole body alive. I was gobsmacked when I first learned that. How had I never thought of it?

One of the things that Suzanne also taught us was that, in reality, every cellular membrane is a brain. After all, each cellular membrane responds to information coming in from outside and then discerns actions. It is, as far as we know, the most granulated part of the decision-making process. If we turn this part of anatomy into poetry rather than mechanistic science, then we are a community of trillions of cells. Each cell is receiving and responding to information in a dance, movement that operates across dimensions. They do this linearly—receive information and then act—and they do this instantaneously, where the receiving and responding is largely the same thing. Our bodies are always time-traveling. This is the most beautiful, purest form of anarchy: emergence.

Why does any of this matter, other than as interesting information (hello head-brain)? Because we can practice listening through all of our brains rather than primarily through one or two. We can connect with the world in a conscious and intentional way, experiencing the sometimes contradictory information that comes in through our head, heart, and gut. We can listen with intention as well as deepen our ability to feel our gut instinct and our heart's longing.

This is a practice that Suzanne taught us, followed by how I have remembered and interpreted it. I am going to write it out here but I have also recorded myself reading it on my website, if you prefer a guided, aural

approach.

Before moving forward, there are two things to do. First, this practice is about listening to what your body communicates to you in the way that water comes up from a spring. Most of us experience thinking as a kind of reaching. We “reach” for the right answer, maybe even feel a sense of a pull at our forehead. Be ready, and perhaps practice beforehand to experience thoughts as rising from someplace other than our rational, searching mind. What rises doesn’t always come as a concrete answer to a concrete question. The body mostly communicates in poetry. Waiting and listening for the up-flow is also about being sometimes surprised by what arises: memories you are not conscious of, messages from ancestors, patterns and connections that can transform.

The second part of preparation: think of a question. It can be general: how am I? What is happening in my life right now? Or it can be specific: a relationship tangle, a decision you need to make, an action you are considering. Hold in your awareness whatever it is that you would like to bring attention to. You can ask why something is the way it is, why something happened to you, why you did or said something. Really, anything at all.

And now you are ready.

First, make yourself comfortable. Drop into yourself. Notice your aliveness, the physical and energetic state of your being. How does your life feel right now, in this present moment? What do you feel, what do you sense? Spend some time with this. In the recording on my website, I take more time supporting this drop-in to sensing. Here, I am just going to invite you to take a moment, notice your weight, to notice the feeling of space around your body and the feeling of space within your body. Let yourself relax. Settle. Come into whatever stillness is possible in this moment. Put this book down and let this happen. When you feel more here, more in the physical truth of your life, then pick up this book again.

Bring awareness to the brain in your head. There is an organ within this bone and it is surrounded by fluid. Literally floating. Sense into this specific relationship of cells, this head-brain. You might bring a hand to your head to help or you might just sense inward, knowing that it is there, even greeting it. Bring your question, your wondering, to this head-brain. Ask it, invite it to respond. Ask your question as a physical thing, see if you can

feel it when you ask it. Then wait and notice what comes. Notice what you physically feel while you are keeping your attention with your head-brain. The head brain is most likely to communicate in thoughts that you would recognize, but it doesn't always. Let what comes be poetic and disorganized, if it is, rather than definitional or orderly. Don't reach for structure or meaning. For now, just notice what comes. Listen to it. When it feels like your head-brain has finished, thank this part of yourself. Take time to thank it; gratitude is a physical thing.

When you are finished, let go of the awareness of your head-brain and bring your attention back to the whole of your aliveness.

When you are ready, you will begin again. Bring your awareness to the brain that is your heart. You might put a hand on your chest or just sense your heart by feeling within. Bring the same question or inquiry. Feel your question as a part of you. Curiosity is an expression of aliveness, a kind of opening and wonder. And then listen. Notice what emerges, what feelings, sensations, and thoughts. Keep your attention with your heart-brain, appreciating this part of you. Again, let it be poetic and disorganized and different if it needs to be. Also, if it is silent, just notice that as true. Keep listening. Let yourself be a witness to whatever floats up, whatever feelings and insights. You might feel rushes of emotion. If you are comfortable, go with them. Let the emotions be as big or as small as they need to be. You might feel sensations of connection or disconnection, expansion or contraction. Just notice. When it feels like your heart-brain is finished, then thank this part of you, this wise self.

And then release. Come back to your aliveness. Notice what is the same, notice what is different. And when you are ready, move on to the third.

Bring your awareness to your gut. These are the twisting of organs that includes twenty feet of intestines. This is a brain with lots of space for pondering and mixing and assessing and asserting. You might put a hand on your belly or just sense your gut by feeling within. What we call your gut-brain is intestine and colon as well as, in a connected role, your stomach and pancreas, liver and gall bladder, and probably spleen. Bring your awareness *in* to your belly, if you can. Notice your density, the amount of gut-awareness that is there between the front of your belly and the skin of your back. You are meeting a part of yourself, saying hello to a place of wisdom and awareness. Now again, bring your question or inquiry. And

then notice what floats up. You might hear words, you might sense physical movements, you might get images or emotions or any number of forms of communication. You might not get anything. Just listen to what comes without trying to make sense of it right now. Just let it come and, when it feels as though it has finished, thank your guts, yourself. And then release.

Come back to awareness of your aliveness and notice what is the same and what is different.

As a final practice, you might sense into your cellular membrane, which is really your whole self. You can feel into it by imagining a kind of fluid containment, this meeting of fluid and membrane, that is happening all throughout the density of your physical body. You might see it as billions of tiny crystalline structures or just feel into the space between an outside and an inside, the energetic imprint of each of those membranes. Don't strain or try too hard. Think of this as what happens when someone walks into a room and you see them and start thinking about them and suddenly, without you making a sound, they turn and look directly at you. They heard you, even if they couldn't see or, well, hear you. It's like that. Felt or not, just the invitation you make, the intention you bring, will make a connection. And then bring your question, your inquiry, and again, listen. Notice anything you get, listen like poetry, listen even if what comes makes no rational sense to your watching mind. And when you are complete, thank this in-knowing that is everywhere, yourself. And then release.

And come back to awareness of your aliveness and notice what is the same and what is different. Because this is the last practice, go ahead and stretch or move, drink water, do whatever feels good and right before coming back to this page.

When you are ready, take a moment to write, draw, or just remember what each of the questions or inquiries brought. Notice how they are the same. Notice how they are different. Feel them in the same way that you feel any community of people who, when asked what they would like, each shares opinions based on their experiences and locations. You are listening to your own internal community.

When they pretty much all agree, you can smile. Those are the easy times, and they are rare. Even if you are asking something like "should I get more rest," which, for most of us, is a pretty quick yes, you will probably get some contradictions. You might get a kind of survival/primal slow yes from

your gut and a feeling of sadness from your heart and thought from your brain that tells you how much work you still have to do.

Listening to all of our brains is a practice for not assuming that single answers exist for anything. It is about practicing living with contradictions. It is about practicing feeling, internally, how we are impacted by life and the many ways in which we respond. It's about seeing/sensing our own layers which then helps us to hold and respond to other people's complexities and contradictions as well. It is about deeply honoring our lives, which is its own thing, and which also enables us to deeply honor the lives of those, human and not, around us. Remember, we are not the only beings with multiple brains.

It's also a really good opportunity to thank the kick-ass facilitators you might know who go into community spaces, listen to a thousand opinions, and synthesize them so that people feel both heard and included in something bigger than themselves. Individually heard and part of a collective body. That's what you are practicing with yourself right now and it is what you or people you know practice when listening to others.

Everything is practice. Now we can practice taking actions or not taking actions based on what we hear from these different aspects of self. Then we listen again. As time goes, you may notice that you listen more to your head-brain and gut-brain than your heart-brain; you may then decide to strengthen that neglected relationship. Do this in the same way that, when interacting with a community, you are in right-relationship when you notice who we are *not* hearing as who you are. Create the conditions to support those who have not yet been heard. We can't force words out until a body feels safe enough and seen enough to share.

Hello your heart. Hello your gut. Hello your cerebellum. Hello the membrane of the cells on the skin of your finger.

These practices are some of the ways we live our way toward revolution. How we become, together, the breath that is liberation. The question-prayer that rises inside me as I read those two sentences is this: what gets in the way of being that liberation right now?

Most of the time, the things we call *reform* and even, sometimes, *movement strategies* are head-brain rational responses to something that needs to change. The head-brain, which is all about taking what is already known and rearranging it in new patterns, comes up with new strategies and

ideas for, as an example, shifting how the police system operates. It makes rational sense to insist that body cameras will then change how police act. It makes logical sense. And it might change some things, but not others. The head-brain might say this is enough, but the other brains might disagree.

The heart-brain will communicate differently. Possibly it will expand and grieve over every act of state-sanctioned violence, feeling/remembering someone who has died. Maybe it will feel the heat of rage, the scream of “Never again,” the setting of a boundary that says “I will not allow this.” Or maybe it will feel/remember a beloved who is a police officer and who the system has changed as a person, or is confused, or who you love, which raises contradictions without you knowing how to bring all the pieces together. The heart-brain might also feel nothing when you ask it about abolition. That is information as well.

The gut-brain will communicate differently also, maybe bringing up your fear of violence, your hunger for safety, or your deep-belly belief that all life is sacred. Or it will have nothing to say.

The membranes may just remind you that all life is connected, always, or just vibrate quickly and uncomfortably, or remain quiet and still.

Liberation—shared, collective, long-term liberation—means listening to all of this: the longing, grief, rage, and confusion; the rational and concrete strategies; the fear of survival and violence; the sense that all life is sacred; the fast vibrating, the stillness ... and whatever else comes up. All of it.

We can’t do that if we don’t practice it within ourselves. There will always be contradictions and differences. There will rarely be a single answer. But these differences are not about separation, they are just different forms of connection. And out of these connections, out of feeling all of them, the contradictions and alignment, sometimes comes the clarity of decision and action.

And then we listen to all of the brains again as they experience the impact of our actions and inactions. Again and again and again, because what we know of a community—whether the community of cells that are our life, or the community that is a neighborhood or an identity or a generation, or the community of life that is a planet—all communities are made up of single elements that are never alone or separate from each other. We are constantly impacting and being impacted, and the best actions or inactions are the ones that emerge from attuning, listening, to what is chaotic as well as what is

clear.

What do your brains say, right now, as you listen to all of this?

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1. The website for the School for Global Somatics is no longer online. For an interview with Suzanne about her work, you can see “The Body Electric,” *Minnesota Women’s Press*, January 2, 2006, [womenspress.com/the-body-electric](http://womenspress.com/the-body-electric).

# Creating the Conditions that Allow Deep Healing

# CAMPAIGNS VERSUS CULTURAL CHANGE— IN THE BODY AND IN THE COLLECTIVE

“It is useful to classify the economic and ecological disruptions that make up this ‘new normal’ of instability into two groups: shocks and slides. Shocks present themselves as acute moments of disruption. These are, for example, market crashes, huge disasters, and uprisings. Slides, on the other hand, are incremental by nature. They can be catastrophic, but they are not experienced as acute. Sea level rise is a slide. Rising unemployment is a slide. The rising costs of food and energy are a slide.”

—adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*<sup>2</sup>

God, I was so angry when gay marriage became the political focus for LGBTQ or queer communities. So incredibly angry.

In 1993, one million people attended the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation with a multifaceted LGBT platform that included reproductive justice, racial and economic justice, and universal health care. *Universal health care*, for god’s sake. At the 1993 March on Washington, not a single part of the platform included gay marriage.<sup>3</sup> Instead, those one million people were marching to prevent discrimination against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people in the areas of family diversity, custody, adoption, and foster care and demanding that the definition of family include the full diversity of all family structures.

In 1993, organizing on the Right was gathering together around the frame of “traditional family values.” Brilliant in its ability to pull together religious fundamentalists and economic conservatives, it focused on perceived threats to the traditional American family and used gays and abortion to raise dollars and mobilize individuals. In 1993, the film *Gay Rights, Special Rights* was produced by the Traditional Values Coalition and went viral (before that term existed).<sup>4</sup> It was a new kind of film, one that intended to drive a wedge between LGBT and Black communities by positioning queers as only white—and, specifically, as wealthy, privileged white people who just wanted to have everything our way, to operate

outside of morality. The film sought to position gays as not Christian and not American, a threat to the family. While those tactics worked in some Black spaces, there were lots of Black people who said, go to hell.

In 1993, LGBT or even just lesbian and gay people were not advocating for legalized relationships in any large numbers. It was not a mainstream LGBT issue. Prior to 1993, there were only eight attempts to either enable or prevent same-sex marriage through some form of legislative or court decision. Each was an isolated individual initiative, not connected to a broader movement. But between 1993 and 2000, there were suddenly twenty-six attempts to prevent same-sex marriage from becoming legalized. During the same period, there were only six pro-same-sex marriage campaigns and four of those were in 1999. Let me spell that out more clearly—the opposition decided that this was our battleground. Those twenty-six out-of-the-blue, fear-mongering attempts to prevent something that wasn't really happening were a tactic of harassment. If you keep badgering someone, at some point they will snap back. The Right named same-sex marriage as our issue. And they created the issue as part of a traditional family values platform. They built an enemy that didn't exist in order to raise dollars and attention for their belief systems. We were on the defensive. A whole hell of a lot of LGBT people snapped back. We weren't queer at this point. Not yet. We were mostly L and G, with occasional mention of B and rarely any narrative space for T.

The shift from our 1993 March on Washington platform to a platform that, at the 2000 Millennium March on Washington and the 2009 National Equality March, focused around equal protection under civil law—and largely on winning same-sex marriage—tells me that the Right was successful. They set the agenda and we followed. They succeeded in frightening many of us. We internalized their stories about us and believed that our right to marry legitimizes our right to exist.

The marriage fight created wedges in LGBTQ communities. Wedges between generations, between flavors and shapes of queerness. One of the wedges was a conflict between different approaches to change. Whether you felt invisibilized by the inability to marry or you felt invisibilized by the demand for marriage equality, there was stress, harm, and overt and indirect violence unfolding, and what resulted is what the brain does when in power struggle moments. The choices seemed to be either submit or defy.

Remember, this was taking place as the devastation of AIDS was only beginning to potentially lessen. Our people, particularly our beloved gay brothers and trans kin, were dying in overwhelming numbers and were treated as disposable by the state, by our families, by our neighbors. These many years later I can understand some of the intense desire to have the heterosexual family structure let us in, but when the marriage debate was raging, I just kept thinking: we traded fighting for universal health care for the right to access to health insurance of our married partners, assuming they even had it?

As with all moments of pain, we fought. I fought. I resented and raged and felt arrogant and overwhelmed. My ability to hold complexity and nuance was almost completely gone. It was finally a beloved who also hated that we were even having this conversation, sadly told me that legalized discrimination is legalized discrimination and, while this is not the fight we want to have, it's still a fight that has to happen.

Heavy sigh.

If you started reading this piece because you want to know more about bodies, please stay with me.

Early on, we knew that Minnesota was going to be a battleground state for gay marriage. I was invited to attend a strategy meeting held by a statewide campaign-organizing group. I knew people in the organization, but I had never worked for a “campaign.” I was unsettled when we started the meeting by briefly sharing our names and then jumping right into tactics. I didn’t know most of the people in the room. I didn’t know if they knew each other. I assumed they must have and wondered why I was there, what I had to bring to a conversation about numbers, messaging, and scale.

As I sat there, one of the campaign directors made a side comment about people who do “movement building,” about how they were going to have to spend time convincing all of those people who believe in “movement building” to focus on the campaign. There was a tightening in the air as some people nodded, as if this was going to be a challenge. Only a few of us looked confused. I asked him what he meant by “movement building.” I don’t remember his exact words but the gist was that some people want to talk about how we feel and what we think; some people worry more about culture than power. He said that, when the enemy is banging at your door, it is a waste of time to talk about how we feel and how to change culture. We

have to stand at the door and prepare to seize power. Period. He was a white, cisgender man, but he wasn't alone in believing this. Many heads nodded.

I left feeling very defensive about my people and my beliefs. I had spent a lot of years doing this thing we called cultural work: creating spaces for people to listen to each other, build relationships, deepen into both an understanding of conditions and a sense of future possibility. We educated around power and access, who had it and who didn't and why. I had wanted to scream at him that, if we didn't change who we are as people, we would live in an endless power struggle that swings back and forth so that, if you were lucky, you lived in a time when your people were the ones on top. I was fighting mad.

But I hadn't yelled at him, or started trashing him to others after I left. Something about his words stuck in me like a burr that kept making me scratch to figure out what was underneath. I knew his dismissiveness was wrong—but did that mean I was right? And why, really, was I so angry?

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I love the approach to bodies that is called craniosacral therapy. As I have written elsewhere, this approach listens to how the fluidity of life animates the membranes of the body. It is ancient and it has its roots in Shawnee and other Indigenous approaches to healing. Craniosacral therapy classes and teachers don't often tell this part of the story, but its wisdom is probably as old as life itself.

Craniosacral work is a slow dance between what you don't know and what you perceive. It is deeply consent-based. As a practitioner, my role is to meet you and to listen, not pushing hard or pulling away unless it is consensual. Most of the time, particularly in biodynamic forms of craniosacral work, all I do is witness.

It's similar to what happens when you first share something painful and vulnerable, maybe even shameful, with another person. If they listen well, then they are just there, with you as you speak. They don't try to own, shape, or overly react to your story. They just listen and because of this witness, your experience of the story changes. The witness is its own form of transformation as shameful hidden things come out and are held without judgment. When something stuck begins to change, it opens up space for

something else to grow. Sometimes this makes life get life-ier rather than more stodgy and slow.

In craniosacral therapy, you create or support the conditions for the body to remember itself. In the biodynamic form I learned, it's called remembering the original blueprint, the deeply generational connection that was laid down before violence, before harm, before the things that have sometimes made breathing feel impossible.

When I first began learning craniosacral therapy, it reminded me of what I had learned as an organizer. Those most impacted by a system should be at the center of changing that system. As I learned it, organizing is about attending to and supporting the leadership of those most impacted as they try to shift that impact. Support can look like all kinds of things—providing tools and strategies or mentorship or care—but all of it is rooted in radical consent. It's about supporting whatever serves the liberation of those most impacted, on their own terms.

That is not the only way to learn to organize, of course. But it's the approach that I gravitated toward. I was less interested in organizing approaches where the leadership or the tactics are brought in to a community, where the community is organized by someone other than their own most respected members. The work I am drawn to is always slower, more intimate, and not the most efficient.

I am also not attracted to learning chiropractic bodywork or deep tissue massage or any of the other forms of bodywork that use force and technique to shift the shape a body holds. I am not interested in being that kind of practitioner, but I sure do get that kind of work done on my own body. Sometimes what I most want is someone with skilled hands to dig into my muscles, really get in there and pound out those fibers so that they soothe and calm.

With my body, I am not at all confused—nor reticent—about the many different ways it wants support and direction in order to change. I don't privilege one over the other. I remember that different touches work at different times. It's with organizing that I have struggled over these questions. I just criticized the man who rolled his eyes at people doing cultural work and movement building. But, of course, I did the same thing with him. I assumed that what he is calling “campaign work”—which he saw as the opposite of what he thought folks like me were doing—was

misguided, controlling, nonrelational bunk. They didn't even start by checking in with each other so we could learn who was in the room! And so I created different sides as much as he did.

The forms of bodywork I practice are slower than more directive bodywork. For a while, I practiced in a chiropractor's office. Often the chiropractor would refer folks to me for a cranio session before they received an adjustment from her. She explained to me that a lot of people come in for chiropractic care to relieve long-term or chronic problems. Chiropractic adjustments will shift the pattern and then there is relief but after a time, the problem re-emerges. When people have craniosacral work first, the adjustment lasts longer.

This made so much sense to me, and it still does. Chiropractic care and craniosacral therapy really work with the same framework but come at it from two different directions. Our bodies are both fluid and membrane, open flowing space and contained structure. Chiropractic works with the structure as the first entry point. That's why they get called bone crunchers, although that doesn't begin to touch on the beauty of their practice.

Chiropractic care is awesome if, for example, you were just in a car accident or something dramatic whacked your body out of alignment. Over the course of sessions, chiropractic care can help the body go back to where it was before the accident. Collarbone slightly compacted? Adjustments will, well, re-adjust you back into place.

What's harder for chiropractic work is shifting long-term patterns. Long-term pain, stress, harm, or held-injury means that our bodies have shaped themselves in response to this harm. Sometimes it's so long term that it's who we are. And sometimes it's how we have learned to survive, where we have built our skills and beauty, even as it also gives us pain. When something is longer term, it is complex and layered. It is no longer about a single system or a single point of harm, but instead is a complexity of tangles and choices that extend in multiple directions. There is no linear fix, there is weaving between impacts.

This is not just about the way two vertebrae are lined up or not lined up. It's about how the soft tissues hold the shape around those two vertebrae. It's not just the two vertebrae, it's how the entire body exists in relation to the pattern of those vertebrae; patterns that have been there for years and sometimes generations. It's internal memory. Culture. It's about the identity,

the sense of self, that has emerged as a result of how those vertebrae are or are not lined up with each other. Are you going to tell someone the alignment of their right bicep muscle, an alignment that feels in balance and strength, is “wrong” because by those two, unaligned vertebrae? Are you going to tell someone who has lived for over twenty years with a particular digestive response that they are “wrong” and that the food they find most like home is harming them? Are you going to disrespect their home that directly?

With those two vertebrae that have been in one kind of shape for the last bunch of years, if you go in and adjust those bones to what you think their alignment should be then, over time, the soft tissues around the vertebrae site will just slowly nudge the bones back into the shape they held before. Here, says the soft tissues, here is where we live, not in that strange sudden change.

And then you are back in the chiropractor’s office getting the same adjustment for the same thing.

Something similar happens with reform approaches to social change. Often, the reform brings about fresh air for, if you’re lucky, the space of the generation who fought for it, but then, over time, the reform flattens and the harm it was intended to shift, shape-changes back. Our work with the Healing Histories Project is all about naming a five-hundred-year history of care, showing how this or that reform has done some things but mostly, after a generation or two, the original violence starts shaping the present again.

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I love the quote with which I opened this essay. adrienne is talking about the shapes of attack, the shapes of destruction she calls “shock” and “slide.” Those differences are real and I am remembering them, deeply, as I sit here in my home on this Dakota land, noticing both the shock of the burned buildings surrounding my home (the impact of the Uprising against the lynching of George Floyd—for those of you in Minneapolis, I live on 11th and Lake) and the slide of spiderwort and lilacs, spring flowers now blooming in September.

Organizing and healing work have the same binary, along with all of the same gradations in between. As I’ve said elsewhere, everything can be a

tool or a weapon, depending on how it is used. Every single thing. Love, hate, hunger, pleasure: the context around them and the intention within them shapes their use. There is no essential “right way” to do anything. There is only relationship, connection, being present with what is happening and then, even if that relationship is with disconnection, determining the next step.

Stop here. Bring up a time when you felt out of control and overwhelmed, even if you weren’t showing it externally. What works for you? When you feel like things are too much, and not in a “gosh, I’m busy” kind of way but as in red flags and true danger, how do you most want to be met?

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I am embarrassed that I can’t remember the name of the man who rolled his eyes at cultural work and movement building. If I could remember him, I would like to reach out and ask him if he remembers that meeting? And if he does, does he still believe the same thing? Those who know more than I do tell me that one of the reasons that gay marriage passed in Minnesota was because the strategy taken was more relational. Rather than power-struggling over values, organizers spent their time talking about love. And talking about love, about family, and about our right to live with those we love and call family *is* part of what shifted the conversation.

I also know that we still don’t have universal healthcare and we still assign resources like health insurance, social security, and other forms of support through the rite of legal marriage. I still think that is horse shit. And gay marriage is still only honored on a state-by-state, town-by-town basis. Some of us are safe, a whole bunch aren’t. And I am not even talking about differences in how our relationships are respected based on our race, class, ability, gender expression, and so on. I am not even touching on the rise of anti-trans legislation that is making it dangerous to love our children and our kin when they name themselves in the ways most true to their hearts.

Shifting the soft tissues, the nonlinear aspects of the fluid self, shifting our habits and patterns: this is slow work. It takes a long time and it does not ascribe to a rigid strategy, because what shifts over a small period of time then shifts everything that happens afterward. There is no map, there is just living. Because of this, the work has to be slow. Each micromovement is like a pebble in the water with the ripples taking time to move throughout

the body. And then some of those ripples bounce back to where the micromovement took place, informing it of what has changed and what hasn't. There is a small and integrated shift.

I often tell those I work with to notice at the end of each session what feels different and what feels the same from when you first walked into the office. Keep noticing and witnessing. And then wait. In the short term, we can likely support your nervous system, your anxiety, your separation from feeling your own life. We can help lessen and settle these things. With a single treatment, much of the time, we can at least do this. But the bigger patterns, shifting anxiety or depression like your grandmother had, or dizziness that shows up when what you are holding gets too heavy—that takes time. Slow, long time with a mix of somatic work and shifting awareness. It's not just about what happens in a bodywork room. It's about every moment for the rest of your life. Healing work should only support the complexity of your life, it is not the center of your life.

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Chiropractic care is to craniosacral work as campaign-based work is to culture work. Different touches work at different times.

I have come to deeply appreciate campaign work and the people who are able to do it. It's not surprising to me that this is largely due to a whole host of younger people of color, mostly women, who have shown up, running for office, getting right in the middle of the fight. They have changed everything I have thought and believed about this kind of work. I was wrong. And in the places where I was right, their actions and commitments make me see that campaigning itself is changing.

The question I am now able to remember more and more is not which approach is the best and why is the other one bad but rather, what gets in the way of connection and relationship and what is the best way to meet this barrier and transform it? Sometimes we need activation to be met with activation, coming in as hard and direct as the situation we are trying to resolve. And sometimes we need something slower, quieter, more emergent. I am likely to step in when the second is needed. I love the shit out of a whole lot of people who can step in with the first.

When I say that the first step in healing is ending violence, I mean just that. Doing whatever is needed to end the violence that is loud and

dangerous in the present moment. This then opens up the space needed for the slower work, the emergent process that is about listening, witnessing, waiting so that something new emerges.

Every seed has ancestor-given internal knowledge of when to grow. They begin preparing while it is still cold and the ground still frozen. They in-know. But if someone has paved over their bed or if there is heavy drought, then that in-knowing can only get them so far. They either have to push with everything they have against the cement, looking for the vulnerabilities in the wall that they then can crack, or they have to wait until there is enough water to let them sprout.

Creating the conditions to shift histories is also about composting, supporting, caring for that seed until it feels, deep within itself, that it is now time to push.

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2. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

3. For a description of the different platforms at the various LGBTQ Marches on Washington, there is a good Wikipedia link:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_March\\_on\\_Washington\\_for\\_Lesbian\\_and\\_Gay\\_Rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_March_on_Washington_for_Lesbian_and_Gay_Rights).

4. *Gay Rights, Special Rights: Inside the Homosexual Agenda* was released in 1993 and is billed as: “An exposé by the Southern Baptist Convention concerning the perceived threat of the Gay Rights Movement to moral values and civil liberties of American citizens. Includes testimonies by gays and lesbians who have repudiated the gay cause to become Christians.”

# WE ARE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT THE CHILDREN

A few years ago, I spent an evening with a group of people coming together to share practices and traditions on how we honor our dead. We talked about ancestors and descendants. We shared food and singing and prayed together. Some of us shared deeply held cultural traditions. Some of us shared experiences and memories. We also told each other stories of our precious dead.

I lost half of my immediate family before I was seven, and a range of others after them. My family went to funerals (sometimes) and told stories about the person who died in those immediate months after their passing (sometimes), but we did not practice intimacy with death. We just were intimate with death.

My daughter was at the gathering. She was high-school aged, one of the only young people sitting in that room. She had the experience of grieving the recent (violent) death of a family member within a circle of intimate strangers. It is her story to tell, but my story is that I watched some of the heaviness around her cousin's death turn to something more connected, less isolating. I watched this and wondered what it is like to experience this for the first time at fifteen as opposed to fifty-four.

A friend began to talk about her grandmother, a woman who did not know how to show the love she felt. She talked about her grandmother's emotional distance and the impact of this on my friend's feelings about her grandmother's eventual death. Then she said something that touched everyone in the room. She reflected on how a chain of broken relationships forms: when a parent is unable to show love, their child will become a parent who doesn't know how to be that deep, steady resource for their child's living. And it continues on, a line of grief and disconnection that becomes culture, family, and the marker for what a person can most expect from the world around them.

She was talking about generational trauma, about the shaping that takes place as babies are born into families whose ability to connect to their own

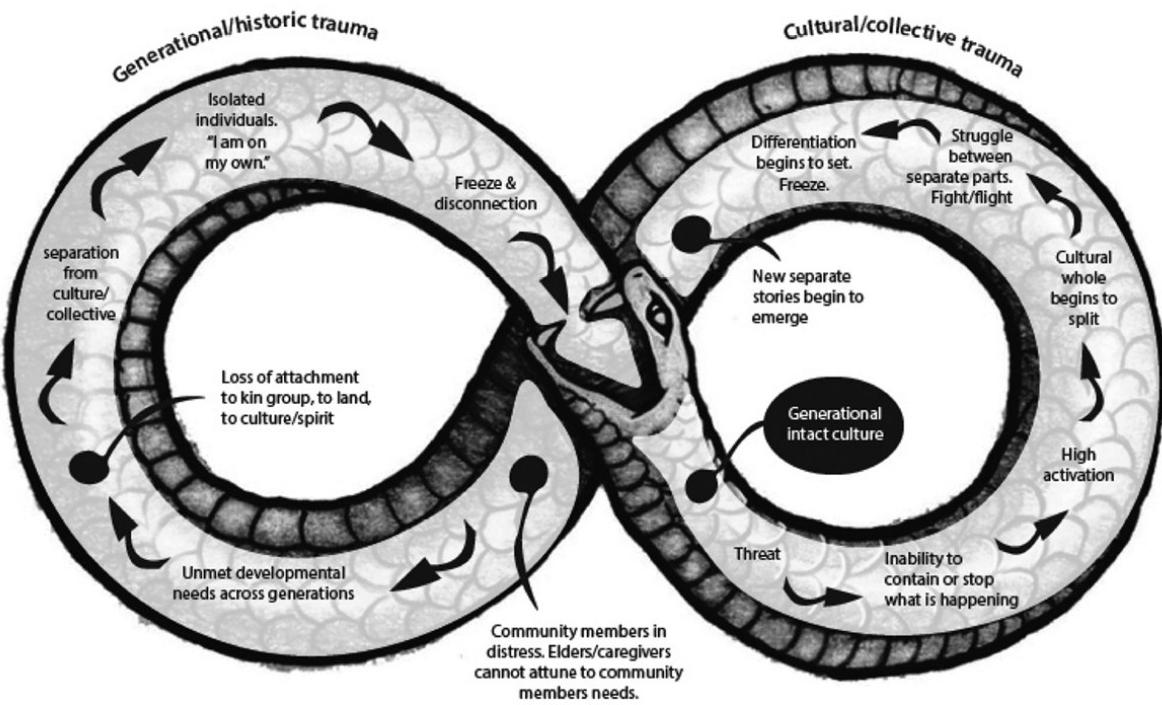
little ones is impacted by what has still not healed within the family.

My friend's reflection visited my dreams that night: a parade of families, of adults stepping up and showing themselves, showing the reasons why that deep steadiness of love might have disappeared. They showed me everything from active horrific violence to the numb disregard of distraction and neglect.

We are alive to experience life. Part of life is the experience of love, which is the experience of connection, of belonging, and of feeling safe as a result. It is how we are wired, moving from the first water world of the womb to the second world of earth and air, through connection and mirroring.

That night, I remembered every attack that supremacy has used to isolate and destroy children within their families, from the original wounds of attempted genocide and the institution of slavery, to every act of deportation, incarceration, and forced migration; every moment of unsupported poverty and normalized sexual and physical violence. I will say this over and over again until I hear us saying it everywhere: every time someone's deep-rooted relationships, long evolved languages, and cultural traditions are taken away by force, it becomes harder for the kin network to make sure its children are safe. It becomes harder and sometimes impossible for elders to pass along the steady, grounded stories that tell the children who they are and why they are here on this planet. This kind of certain safety and storytelling is part of the chemistry of unconditional love. No single one of us should have to figure out for ourselves the meaning and experience of our life upon this planet or to be watching, alone, and moment by moment, to make sure our bodies are safe. We are not wired for hypervigilance as a permanent fixture. It slowly and steadily kills us.

A famous study on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) uses research to prove what all of us know by instinct: if you do not protect the children and keep them safe, then they will be hurt and that hurt will translate into many kinds of pain in their later lives.<sup>1</sup> All of the ways that adults are not able to care for and are violent toward the children in their care, this generational chain of harm, is at the root of each child who grows up to be an adult who causes harm to their own body and the bodies of others.



I had a beloved friend, Owen Marciano, create this graphic for me to show the relationship between generational trauma and how we raise and care for our children.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to show how the math of massive violence moves forward into a people's line and how, even with the best of intentions, it continues to be centered.

I am going to move through what this graphic says but before I do, take a minute. What is going to help you to read this, not as objective information but as something that has happened and is happening to real people? As something that is living and painful, but that has space within it for change? Can you pause and light a candle, pray, do something to bring tenderness into the room and into your body? When we talk about ancestors, they are here with us, whether we remember their names and lives or not.

Depending on who your people are, I might be starting with a story that was true five thousand or two thousand or seven hundred years ago—or perhaps more recently, at the time of your great-great-grandparents, or now, in your lifetime. At one point, all of us come from people who are part of an intact culture. By intact culture, I mean one that was rooted into the land it emerged from, depended on, and lived with. One that has had the time to

develop teachings and practices that support the glory and survival of the community. Or, as Sherri Mitchell (Penobscot) describes it: time to listen to the sacred instructions of the land upon which we live and to evolve cultural practices and traditions that live alongside and with all of the relatives surrounding us. It's not only humans that listen to these sacred instructions and build lifeways from them. All communities of beings listen to the same sacred instructions and then emerge "culture" in response, whether monarch butterfly or heron.

This is about cultural cohesion, cultural continuity across generations, both fluid and moving, contained and held. This is Indigeneity and it has been about 6,500 years since all human people lived in this way upon the planet. All of us. And, of course, we lived this way before we emerged into being these two legged overthinking people-types.

At its simplest, what this graphic shows is this: in the beginning there is cultural continuity, cultural ground. This doesn't mean some perfect place without people being shitheads. It means cultural containers that focus on relationships with all life as the central reason for organizing ourselves and our lives. This is a generational cultural continuity that evolves but at the speed of life and relationship—of trust, as adrienne maree brown puts it—not at the speed of abstract thought and individual decision. This is the beginning, with thousands of years behind it.

Then comes an attack—not just a single attack or even laddered battles over time between peers and known communities. I am talking about a decimation, an attack that attempts to eradicate the people and/or to completely take them and their land over to be controlled by someone else. I am talking about the original wounds of this land, the intent to uproot and unsettle a complete and entire people, not to negotiate access to this or that hill or river.

The plants vary on the Greenway near my home based on the amount of sun and rain and the length of the seasons. Tons of spiderwort one year, day lilies the next. There is a competition here, a push and pull, but it is not a decimation. Decimation is when someone comes and mows the entire hillside or digs it out to build a new home, asserting an individual desire over an entire ecosystem and destroying it in the process. This is the kind of decimation that destroys the continuity of a culture as opposed to becoming one of the stories that the culture lives to tell.

With this decimation, the ability for the adults to track and care for the children is compromised. Sometimes the children are stolen. This is happening now—remember, none of this is just information. Sometimes the older ones are killed or told that the only way they can stay alive is if they change what they are teaching. This is happening right now. Babies are born, because they are always born, and their open lives enter spaces where the bodies they mirror and attach to are bodies in the midst of pain and disconnection. Some remember to tell the stories, but they are told in fragments, or they are told but others argue that the stories are no longer relevant.

This is always the fastest way to take control of a people, destabilize the relationship between children and their elders, separate them from each other, and decimate the chance that descendants are connected to the cultural continuity of their elders.

First contact happened over five hundred years ago on Turtle Island, and the violent attack on language and culture—on sovereignty—has not ended. If you look at the chart again, you see where cultural trauma turns into generational trauma. There is a point when the loss of attachment to kin, to culture, to land, and to spirit is complete enough to weaken generational passing of knowledge from the old to the young. When the unconditional belonging that depends on these attachments is completely severed. When that is gone, then the earliest conditioning of our children, our babies, is a trauma-conditioning that says, you are on your own. You have to figure out this life thing by yourself. This is developmental trauma, or the harm that comes when our children are not held in the evolutionary-wisdom-poetry of attachment and belonging. The only way that our smallest ones know how to survive this is to believe, not with their minds but with their lives, that there is something wrong with them and their deep longing. Those babies become adults who have children who are shaped within this disconnection. Soon you are where so many of my people are: numbed to deep connection and intimacy, in a frozen state with a trip-wire protection system against feeling anything that is inside that freeze. We build systems to help keep our pain from being felt, until it somehow feels natural to build systems that turn other people's bodies and lives into objects.

What does it mean that, outside of culturally grounded and connected space, our movements are largely absent of children? I see portable babies

in movement spaces, lives that are still in the enmeshment stage with their adult and so are held tight against the body, nursing or bottle feeding or sleeping on one lap after another. This is beautiful and right. I see far fewer children who are at the question-asking stage, the interrupting, slow-things-down, let's-play stage. Around age two or three, they start to disappear from most places of (non-culturally-rooted) movement work. My question isn't just a form of inclusion politics, it's a question about how we imagine and experience community. I am linking arms with everyone reading this and looking at the question together. I don't always know how to do this differently, even though I am a parent myself.

When we don't do this work differently, the children disappear. And other things happen when the children disappear—from mild disregard to deep and dangerous violence. That wound of separating families, of professionalizing or formalizing care spaces, of putting the care of the children into a different category from the care of the communities, continues forward. It also impacts how our movements form and what those movements believe in and make possible.

An experience at Standing Rock impacted me forever on all of this. One night, thousands of us were woken up by people driving through the camp and calling for everyone to get up and go to the main road. I jumped awake, thinking that the camp was being raided or some kind of outside threat was approaching. I was sleepy, bleary-eyed like everyone else, stumbling to the main road without knowing what was going on. We learned that we'd been awakened because a little girl was missing from her parent's tent. They wanted us ready in case they needed a search party to find her. Rumors were passing up and down the lines, bits and pieces of the story. The folks who had awakened us asked us to not spread rumors but to wait. They would let us know once they had more information. While we were waiting, a white woman standing next to me and a friend complained about being woken when people weren't sure if the child was actually missing. "Why couldn't they wait and wake us up when they knew for sure?" she asked.

Her words shocked something awake for us. We turned to her and said versions of, "I would rather be woken up for a false alarm than risk that child's safety." The child was found safely at an aunt's house, having been driven home when she got sleepy. When the all-safe was sounded, the thousands of people drifted back to tents and fire rings.<sup>3</sup>

I want to live where I can assume that you are going to come and bang on my door when a child is missing—or your grandmother, or the person you've never met who lives alone at the corner, where there are now three days of mail sticking out of his mailbox. This is the normal that I want. This is why it matters that my daughter got to experience grief as a collective, held, and normalized thing, not letting the fact of a violent death go unwitnessed and uncared for. It shifts what happens after, and not just for her but for the small ones that she might someday be in relationship with.

When my partner and I decided to have a child—and because we are dykes, it was truly a decision—we talked about the contradiction embedded in having children. On the one hand, we knew that we would have an instinctual desire to protect our child and keep her safe. We also knew that by raising a white child or a light-skinned child, we were raising someone who would be supported and protected by a range of systems we were trying to change. This is just true. Our child is deeply special to us and, at the same time, she is no more special than any other child. Our work is not to protect our child but to protect children, to love children, and to care about children. We asked others around us to watch and notice if and when we assert our child's rights over the rights of other children.

It's about remembering the descendants, not as someday concepts but as real living, breathing, small people who are tugging on our pant legs and asking us to remember them, play with them, keep them safe from harm.

And to move along with them rather than running ahead and expecting them to catch up.

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1. Vincent J. Felitti, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1, 1998): 245–58.

2. My friend, Owen Marciano, can be found at ohmarciano.com for his artwork and also at nonnaterra.com for his tarot.

3. For another reflection on what I experienced at Standing Rock, please read my friend, Irna Landrum’s piece in the *Daily Kos*, “Stories from Standing Rock: How You Can Keep the Black Snake Out of Your Water. You Can’t Drink Oil,” November 10, 2016, <a href="http://dailykos.com/stories/2016/11/1/1589695-Stories-from-Standing-Rock-how-YOU-can-keep-the-Black-Snake-out-of-our-water>You-can-t-drink-oil.

# ON ELDERING, ATTACHMENT, FEAR, AND CONTROL

There's a conversation I have with folks decades younger than me. It's a response to the question: what can I give you in return? This question usually comes after I have given some kind of care or support or met some kind of need without asking for anything in exchange. And so I am asked: what can I give you in return? I usually reply like this: I don't need anything right now. This doesn't have to be an immediate exchange, a transaction. I will need you when I get older, when I start to disappear. I need you to remember that I'm still here and to find me, to reach out rather than wait for me to show up.

People often disappear from movement spaces as they get older. We also disappear if and when we have children, if and when we have to take care of our own parents or other folks dependent on us, and we disappear or never appeared to begin with when movement spaces aren't accessible for reasons of cash or ability or the times when parties are scheduled to gather us together.

By movement spaces I mean this; those collective spaces where people come together to deepen understanding, plan action, build culture, grieve and mourn, celebrate and resist. Those spaces that organize around words like liberation and justice and healing, that are committed to shifting the patterns of control and surveillance that began with colonization and white supremacy and that includes control and surveillance around gender, ability, and spirit. I mean those places where life is generative and textured and responsive to the greatest shit and the most glorious glory of the moment we live in. From memorials to art showings to action plannings to community garden planting to popular education to cultural and spiritual and political and emotional and body moments of growth and push and strategize and change, they are spaces where life moves, where movements are born and deepen. I love these life-y spaces, where there is a crash of generations and culture and conflict and care. Where trauma acts on relationships as much as liberation. I have always found a home in them,

one way or another.

I have no idea what being sixty-five or eighty-five will feel like (hello to those of you who are already there). I am not expecting to ever retire, whatever that means. I expect to slow down. I am already noticing, at around sixty, that things are different. I don't want to be in the middle of things anymore. Things are changing, inside me and between us. I don't want to leave but I do want to reshape.

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It was maybe fifteen years ago. We were sitting on the picnic table in front of our house, whiskey in two glasses and that earnest feeling of a first true conversation with a new friend. The sun was setting, as it does every single day. He said to me, “I am so hungry for elders. I want to know how to have one. People don't have a lot of time, just open time and open spaces where I can come, ask questions, listen. I am so angry about this. So very angry.”

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The word *elder* is like the word *healer*. You don't use it to name yourself. I have been lazy with the word healer, forgetting what I believe and sometimes using it for myself. I never do that with elder. That word feels, more than almost any other, like something attached to a collective, an experience. Something concrete, real, bestowed.

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If you are reading this, it is likely that you have been raised outside of an intact culture; a culture where children are centered, where the most vulnerable are centered and supported because we are only as strong as our most vulnerable members. It is unlikely you have been raised where each life stage has been held, where children are children, protected and taught and supported in the ways of wildness as well as the domestication of culture. Where becoming an adult is tracked, where there are clear directives that say on one side you are a child, and on the other you are something else. It is highly unlikely that you grew up in a way where you saw elders, respected and in the middle of things, teaching, listening, modeling, being; holding their peers accountable and being held accountable by the communities who claim them. This means it is likely that you, like me, have absolutely no idea what I am talking about.



After I had my daughter, I sent letters to all of the parents I had been organizing and working with. I am sorry, I told them. I am sorry for every single time I have not understood what it is to be a parent, for every single time—and there have been many—that I contributed to the difficulties you face in joining spaces that are not geared for children. I am sorry for my ignorance, my impatience, and my assumption that I understood.

Recently, I have wanted to write similar letters to those who are ten, twenty, and thirty years older than me. The apology is different. As much as anything, it's an acknowledgment. Hey, I just wanted you to know that I remember you. I remember seeing you when I was first coming out on the scene, you who are older than me. I came out into the clubs and bars and institutions and identities you created and I also spent a lot of time rejecting and pushing back and changing the clubs and bars and institutions and identities you created. Sometimes that pushing was right on and necessary and sometimes it was more projection than push. I just wanted you to know that I see you. I remember you.

In the early 1990s, I worked at a radical women's bookstore, Amazon Bookstore, the oldest ongoing independent feminist bookstore in the country.<sup>1</sup> Amazon was the first local shop to carry sex-positive dildos and vibrators and other sex toys. Our intent was to make it safe for women to look, touch, and ask questions. That first wave of feminist and womanist pleasure activism was building with stores like Good Vibrations and magazines like *On Our Backs*.<sup>2</sup> It was just after the sex wars of the late 1970s and 1980s and after essays like “What We’re Rolling Around in Bed With” began to shift our conversation.

Within the first week of setting up our new case of sex positive magazines, angry women came in with red paint and threw it on the stacks. Vagina'd bodies with low-slung dildoes were perceived, by some, to be a form of sexual violence, a kind of patriarchal alignment. Soon after this happened, I was talking with a coworker about “70s lesbians,” feeling all of the smug self-satisfaction of knowing better, of being sexually positive, of being more evolved than the red paint throwers. One of the bookstore's founders, older than me by almost twenty years, someone who came out and was fierce during the 1970s, turned away from where she was shelving

books and called me out: Susan, she said, your generation didn't invent dildoes and sex. Just because we didn't have them made of silicone in beautiful colors didn't mean we weren't fucking and coming and rolling around like all of the rest of you. You have no idea what you're talking about. We weren't just having sex; we were fierce about ending monogamy and ending all of the patriarchal assumptions about love and sex and relationships. I look at *your* generation and I think how tame you are! Professional organizations and legal rights: we wanted to trash all of it, have as much sex as we wanted, and rebuild every single institution and cultural practice that has come out of patriarchy and capitalism. I look at you and think a lot of you have settled.

Oh. And oh again. Happily, in that moment, I didn't fight back, but listened. And felt humbled down to my toes. I had taken her life and the life of her peers and turned them into a simplistic story that I could use to make myself feel powerful.

I want to write letters. Listen to stories. Apologize. Projections are heavy things and they tangle in our feet, our wheels, our hearts, and make it difficult to move.

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I know people within specific traditions, even if their cultures are under attack and have important pieces to violence, they remember eldering. Their elders are respected for knowing the language and/or the stories, the ways to remember and grieve. There are processes, protocols, agreements for honoring these elders. When people in these communities are young, they learn how to be in a relationship with their elders. I am grateful to have some of those people in my life. When I walk into the spaces they inhabit, there is a weight that lifts. It's a weight I didn't realize that I was carrying. When I move into Native spaces and watch as, unquestioningly, food, chairs, and attention are brought to the elders in the room—they are cared for before anyone else eats or sits—something in me relaxes. The fact that we are all in different developmental stages, that we each serve purposes that support and connect one to the other, from the youngest to the oldest, is just known. Not with the brain as an object for understanding, but from the whole self as a form of breathing and being. A form of connection. I am not romanticizing this. Elders and young people in these spaces still misbehave

toward each other, are confused, get lost, and sometimes cause harm. And still ... there is something that I notice because in most places, it is absent.

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We are all surrounded by stories of powerful leaders, of people who are or might be elders, and who deeply and thoroughly abuse their power. Sexual boundary crossing. Economic boundary crossing. Narcissism.

Defensiveness. An inability to listen. Charismatic seduction. Gaslighting. You are either for me or against me and being against me means you don't have access to this work, these relationships, this safety, this home. There are examples in every single community, whether the sharp-eyed hungry ones have dominant cultural power or not. Is it any wonder how few younger people actually trust the older people in their midst? How do you know when someone is trustworthy? What does it take to open your heart against a history of predators?

Being older does not automatically make you an elder.

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For a few years, we had conversations at the People's Movement Center, a collective healing space in Minneapolis, about forming an elder's council to support the movement. We weren't the only ones having this conversation, but we had our version of it. This was during a time of multiple actions, multiple occupation sites, multiple moments of front line liberation work in response to the murder of Black men, of transpeople, of land through the building of pipelines. Boundaries were being crossed, organizers in high stakes situations were abusing sexual and economic power while also fighting hard against the systems and institutions whose abuse is generational and epidemic. This tangle of trauma and fight was causing as much harm as the systems being held accountable.

When we talked about building an elder's council, we named different people we would invite to a first gathering. As we listed names, we noticed how many of the people were powerful to some but complicated to others. We talked about the wounds that exist among and between us. We talked about how harm has been caused in both directions, about how much hunger there is for elders and how much, because of this hunger, power has been abused. Our idea, which we never followed through with, was to have

a kind of probationary period, one month, maybe three. During this time, the council would be open to anyone who has experienced harm from those on the council to come and share their stories and their impact. This probationary period was envisioned as a process of repair. We talked about the need for humility, for the space for healing between and among us. We were clear that there was a space to be created, a space for eldering. We also knew that there were many tangles of power and identity and history that had to be held and tended to. We thought that if we did this practice, something different might be available on the other side.

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Years ago, a friend of mine put together a list of qualities for an elder. She told me that young people can actually call people to be their elders. I had never heard of this. She is the only person I know who has ever done such a thing, looked around and called those older to be her elders. She chose two or three people and reached out to them.

Calling someone to be an elder, she explained, is a formal thing. It's very direct and very specific. If you are called, you have to spend some time really thinking about it. And if you say yes, then you have to make a commitment to being an elder. And the person who calls? You have to make a commitment to being in a relationship with the one you name as elder. Being in a relationship means being in a supportive role, means being up close in a relationship while you are learning from what they have gathered, from the stones in their pockets they've pulled out to share with you.

My friend's list for what it means to be an elder includes things like being firmly engaged in self-study and reflection; being grounded in community life, including taking on the responsibilities of teaching and guiding. The ones who are called also have a knowledge of their cultural heritage, the heritage they share with those who call them. They are respected, committed, and available to community members. They give clear and consistent messages and display healthy boundaries. (This is the one that really gets to me—because I know many who do everything else but they still struggle with this sense of boundary.) They have experience in handling conflict respectfully and do not engage in needless destruction. They have sharp understandings of systems of power, are able to take responsibility for mistakes, and are humble. Reading her list, I got hungry, a

young hunger, emanating from the part of me that has not received enough of this kind of nourishment. That part of me is still in there, a bit annoyed. She didn't know she could have called people to be her elders. She doesn't trust that if she had, they would have come. She is looking, with one eyebrow raised, at the older version of herself who has recently started experiencing younger people making this call of her.

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What we learned from those before us is as much about handing off the wounds in our family lines as it is about surviving those same wounds. The more your people were protected by social systems through their race and economics, the more likely you learned things about managing those systems, profiting in those systems, and organizing your body (posture, facial expressions, loudness and pacing of speech, clothing, hygiene) to be recognized so that you can be protected by those systems. The less your people were protected by social systems through their race and economics, the more likely your people taught you how to survive those systems, how you are beautiful no matter what those systems tell you—your skin, your hair, your face, your voice, the way your body moves. Within these traditions, there are specifics of gender and ability and all kinds of other nuances that amplify and illuminate how we are recognized, or not. If you know me, you hear me repeat John Mohawk's words often: culture is a community's collective agreement on the best way to survive.

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To elder is, I believe, a spiritual act. It is confusing to say this in English. I mean *spiritual* as in culture/ancestors/connection/source/history/future/time-traveling. As long as we are terrified of power, and until we repair the abuses that power has created, this deeper part of eldering, this deep-spirit trust cannot be fully accessed. There is nourishment all around us, we are so hungry, and yet we can't take it in. This is why we are in right relationship when we prepare to be elders from the moment of being born: by how we stretch and push and make mistakes and repair and heal and heal again. It's easier to do this when there are those in front of us, showing us how. And when they aren't there, we just have to awkwardly begin anyway. Elders-in-training, every

single one of us.

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According to James Vukelich, the word *gichi-aya'aa*, or the Ojibwe (Anishinaabemowin) word for *elder*, literally means “a great being.” The word for old woman, *mindimooyenh*, is “the being who is holding us all together.” It’s the same word used for the concept of a matrix. The word for old man, *akiwenzii*, means “comes from the earth, of the earth, and returning to the earth.” I cannot do full enough justice to James’s teachings. If you don’t learn from him already, find his teachings through social media. His teaching on *gichi-aya'aa* includes cultural protocol on what it means to be in relationship, in community, with elders.<sup>3</sup>

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Here is what, as parents, we are supposed to do: we bring children into this life and we raise them with a lens that helps them make sense of the world around them. This is why things are, we explain to them. Here is what you have control over and here is what you do not. Here are the choices you can make, and here is where there are no choices. Here are the people who came before you, remember them and feel into what they left for us. Here are the people we live among, you are no more important than any other, even as you are unique and beautiful. Here is how we care for and prepare for our descendants.

If life made sense, we would be supporting our young to never leave their bodies, to feel and sense and know connection to themselves, to us, and to others who are kin and community. We would help them feel connected to the land on which they live, not as an object but as a living being who sustains us. We would support them to know culture; to feel a sense of spirit and expansion. We would support them to know history, not as a drag and a set of rules but as the springboard that life-rushes to the future. They would grow within the boundaries of their individual bodies with generations of sediment behind them, feeling the connection of all things and the heart-pulling joyfulness of what is possible.

Each of us should, as a foundational instinct, have a deep sense of our right to be alive, of the glory of our living, connected selves. Western psychologists call this secure attachment but often only define it as being

“connected to those we love.” This is a huge thing, but it should go deeper than that. “Secure attachment” is about being connected to all life, to all of our kin, our relatives, human and nonhuman. Secure attachment is about the land and all living beings as much as about those we share a kitchen with. Secure attachment means that, when we are in stress and struggle, we feel good about asking for and receiving support. We don’t overthink it but instead assume that if we can’t do it alone, then we shouldn’t try.

Secure attachment doesn’t mean eternal happiness. Life is hard. We cause harm and are harmed. People we love die. Things don’t work out. We react to things out of fear and so we lie or steal or fight. And we try to come back to connection. We gain insight and perspective. Some folks do this deeply and they are teachers. They hold integrity that the community recognizes, and they are the ones who are called to be elders.

Secure attachment is a birthright. It is what is supposed to happen; it’s what the poetry of evolution planned for. With every part of me, I believe that multigenerational dominance culture (white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.) is an attachment disorder. It is something that is taught to us, more from context and nonverbals than direct communication. It is taught to us when we are first emerging from the womb. It shapes us. As we look around at the parents who are supposed to protect us, support us, pass on culture and values and practices, we become what is already here, in our home and outside them.

Because of this, when we are young and when we are old, we don’t know how to find each other and clasp hands as an act of support and strength and generational forever.

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1. There is a fair amount of historical material online about Amazon Bookstore, founded in 1970, including documentation of our fight against the online Amazon Books in 1999. At that point, electronic bookselling was just on the rise and small bookstores were being forced to close all over the country. The store moved and changed names, finally ending its lineage in 2012.

2. *On Our Backs* was the first woman-run, erotica magazine, including lesbian erotica. It ran from 1984–2006.

3. The blog of James Vukelich, Kaagegaabaw, focuses on various Ojibwe “words of the day,” [jamesvukelich.com/blog/ojibwe-word-of-the-day-gichi-ayaaa-an-elder-literally-a-great-being](http://jamesvukelich.com/blog/ojibwe-word-of-the-day-gichi-ayaaa-an-elder-literally-a-great-being).

# THE EXTENT OF MORAL INJURY

War is good for the economy. A million and one needs suddenly become crucial (and profitable) in wartime. Sanitary towels (period pads) were first mass-produced for Red Cross nurses during World War I. Before this, dealing with periods was a private thing, mostly using home-made materials. Tea bags were created to ensure Germans troops had tea on the battlefield. They called them tea bombs. During World War I, the Germans invented a lot of things that eventually made their way to market: veggie sausages and sun lamps, for example. Zippers were created by a Swiss manufacturer and mostly lay dormant until the U.S. military put them on Navy uniforms, and a market was born. Penicillin and computers owe their success to World War II. Conservative economies go eager and loud when there's a war on. It's one reason capitalism loves a battlefield. Free product testing.

This all raced through me as I learned about the concept of “moral injuries.” Have you heard of this yet? It’s an injury to your values or conscience when you have witnessed, perpetrated, or failed to prevent an act that compromises your values or morals. In other words, it’s what happens when you participate in—directly or indirectly—something awful and evil, something that goes against what you believe in, or you do nothing to stop it. This contradiction of your values is so impactful that it becomes its own form of trauma. It can lead to depression and suicide and it can lead to acting out, to taking that pain and rage that should have erupted that first time and then leaking or harshing it out at the world around you. The concept of “moral injury” developed as a way of understanding the complexity of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in military veterans. Examples of experiences that could lead to moral injury: being in battle, participating in the murder of civilians, giving orders that result in the death of a servicemember, failing to report knowledge of sexual violence directed against yourself or another servicemember, a change in belief about the need for a war you just participated in, and following any orders that contradict your deepest held values. Moral injury, according to those developing this concept, is a soul wound rather than a physical wound. It

causes deep harm to the foundational part of a person, the part of us that says yes, my life has value.

The conversation about moral injury is, like all wartime products, now moving into other conversations, including those focusing on people in law enforcement and who work in corporations that put profits above the health and safety of their staff and/or customers. It's being used to talk about health care providers who feel powerless about the impact of insurance companies on the care they are able to provide. What these reflections have in common is a freeze around shame and guilt; an inability to move forward into a creative connected life because of the debilitative impact of an unfinished moral injury.

I first heard someone talking about moral injury on a podcast about craniosacral therapy. The guest speaker said the phrase “moral injury” and, without even hearing what he meant by it or how it was applicable to the conversation, I burst into tears. Those words aren’t specific enough: I gripped the steering wheel in my hands and felt this raw wail start somewhere below my belly and come clawing its way up and out as tears and a high keening sound took me by surprise. Yes, worried friends, I pulled over. Hitting rewind, I sat and listened as two men talked about moral injury. It took me a few times to actually hear what they were saying because something deep was going on that was way before words, way outside of linear thought.

A moral injury is the pain of the unwilling, the shocked, the frozen, the perpetrator.

Growing up, I was hurt badly by some people in my family. For whatever reason, during these periods of violence, I remember knowing as a child that this perpetration was not really who they were. I remember knowing, without clear intellectual understanding, that this violence was the result of the violence they experienced, a chain of harm. I had an instinctual understanding of collective historical violence. Except I spent entirely too much time explaining or understanding those who were harming me rather than just being rageful and saying “No.” Today, I see the nuance, the truth that violence is handed down as a collective generational thing and the truth of individual agency and accountability for participation in that violence. Healing is the weaving between these things.

As I was listening to the podcast, something else burst forth with

hiccupping grief. It wasn't personal grief, stories of things that happened to me dancing behind my eyes. It was older than that, something that felt pulled out of ancestral lines, overwhelming and too complex for anything as mundane as detail and story. Once that intensity started to quiet, a whole host of other things came in its place. The first was this: fuck you, U.S. Fuck you for your tenderness to your soldiers, your willingness to take on the truth of trauma only in those who follow your orders. Fuck every single institution using "moral injury" to explain how people in power sometimes feel bad about the shitty things they do. Fuck you!

So that's the rage part. It came in hot and heavy and loud, just as loud and intense as the grief that was first there. It lasted while I first wrote this piece, a low burn in my belly; an anger about how rare it still is for victims of violence to be visible and held. But as time went on, this shape-shifted. I felt, and I feel, the truth of how many of our bodies, including the bodies of soldiers, are pawns in some power broker's profiteering. At my high school, less than 30 percent of graduating seniors went on to post-secondary education like college or apprenticing in the trades. The majority of boys and some percentage of girls went into the military. It was one of the few options for working-class kids.

Understanding moral injury is an essential part of breaking the cycle of violence. The perpetrator learns to be a perpetrator and then passes it on. There is a particular kind of harm experienced by perpetrators; a harm that is then defended against and justified, which only increases the pain, isolates the victim, and freezes the trauma into a repeat loop. People with moral injuries may see themselves as immoral, irredeemable, and irreparable. They may convince themselves that the world is immoral, so what does it matter anyway. This can result in many horrible things: self-harm, lack of self-care, substance abuse, recklessness, hopelessness, decreased empathy, self-loathing, preoccupation with internal distress, and self-condemning thoughts. There is a deep level of shame that makes people angry, aggressive, and defensive.

This description of moral injury pretty much defines the impact of the founding of this country. Or, more directly, the freeze and control that happens on the other side of a moral injury, when that moral injury has not been attended to, so the body needs to close it off in order to move along.

Generation after generation, families come to "new lands" to make a

better life for their children who then pick up arms and kill the families who had been living here for thousands of years. White slavers, good “Christians,” and “community leaders” participated in enslavement, beatings, lynchings, and in defending the acts of other community members who did these things. This was all part of the creation of the concept of whiteness, a collective moral injury on a massive scale. Moral injury refers to the evolution of U.S. patriotism, a strategy to justify violence so that our deep shame is not felt. We are not ashamed, we are exceptional.

The cycle of violence that began with the original wounds that created this country has to end. Those early European folks were not inherently evil. They were making choices based on the best sense of their own survival, and that included committing or witnessing acts of unspeakable violence that they were never accountable to. They just kept pushing forward, making excuses, and letting part of their humanity die. Most probably believed they had no other choice. We now have a deep and pervasive moral injury that has become defended as culture.

When I see the intense reactivity directed by mostly white folks at gay pride marches, pipeline protesters, children wearing hijab in school playgrounds, I wonder if maybe this intense reaction is a sign of lingering humanity, an overreaction as a way of covering up something that feels confusing, shameful, or wrong. Individual accountability for acts of violence is a deeply necessary thing. So is collective accountability, the ability of people to say: we did this. Only this can make way for re-entering collective human space. At the same time, not as an excuse or a minimization, but as clarity for how things emerge, I hold compassion for the experiences that caused someone to act in violence rather than with the deepest and earliest life expression that always, given the choice, prefers to love.

My fear is that the concept of moral injury will become just another tool that protects those with social power from having to be accountable to power’s impact. It will focus on veterans rather than those who put the bodies of our young people into the impossible situations that cause moral injury. My worry is that moral injury will become another way that white mass shooters, corporate executives, and militarized police officers are understood and forgiven while meanwhile, the deep moral injury that is the United States itself continues to roll forward. As a child, it made deep sense

to understand that the harm I was experiencing had generations behind it. I forgave the harm by understanding it before I learned how to be angry about what had happened. It's the other way around for the moral injury of the United States. I start in anger, rage, and struggle, with that deep sense of generational compassion behind it.

Those who work with veterans experiencing moral injuries are instructed to help the veteran make meaning out of why they acted as they did, understand the context that created the conditions, and, along the way, deepen their ability for self-compassion and forgiveness. Part of their healing includes looking for opportunities for repair, for re-engagement and reconnection.

When you read the material about moral injury, it reads like a guidebook for working with dominant culture people, the steps you go through to bring someone from numbed-out dominance back into collective humanity. Is this a potential crack in the defense system around the original moral injuries of this land? Am I being foolish for feeling some kind of hope? And where do I go, who do I talk to, to widen that crack because, oh lord, may this crack widen and deepen and split into pieces all of those things that keep mass perpetration in place. To every god and creator and ancestor and scientific ideology that exists, here is my prayer, again and again. May it be so.

# WORDS LIKE SONAR: POWER AND COMMUNICATION

There has been a long-standing argument in linguistics over the origin of language. Why, linguists ask, do we speak? What is the use of language? The majority view is that we speak in order to communicate: there is some gap between you and I, and language bridges that gap. We speak in order to be understood.

I like a different belief, one that has not been as centered but is gaining in popularity. This belief says that we are like plants and animals; like the relatives who are our common ancestors. A plant puts out a flower to say I am here, smell me, know me, glory in my life! It is a wide open thing, an expression of self that is open to every life passing by. It's a specific kind of communication, made up of organic compounds that, when mixed with air, produce a vapor that we call scent. And bees and bats like the scent and cuddle up to the flower to make other things happen.

Speaking in order to be understood is different than speaking to express yourself, your life. And the difference is mostly about power.

If the first theory is correct, that I speak in order to be understood, then I have done a good job speaking only if you understand me, right? The responsibility is on me to communicate in such a way that you understand me. You have the power to determine if I have done a “good” job communicating. And to be understood, well, it's one thing if we are just talking about when dinner is ready and something entirely different if I am telling you about how I love, how I hurt, and why I choose the life that I live.

I remember the first time I spoke with someone who was not raised in the validation-heavy communication style that I was raised with. By validation-heavy I mean active listening—I show I am with you by nodding, making affirming sounds, and smiling while you speak. This person was raised in a culture where listening is a silent thing, something observational. You show respect by sitting and listening until the person is finished. You don't respond to their words unless invited to do so. If you have something to say,

you say it after they are finished. The first time this happened, I felt awkward. How do I speak if you are not showing me with gestures and sounds that my speaking matters? How do I know that I am being heard if you are not weaving my words back at me with your own?

If I communicate just to express myself, then the power stays with my life. It still matters whether or not you understand me. A plant is going to die if it puts out a scent that no bee or bat is interested in. It needs those bee legs to cover with pollen and lift that pollen over to another plant.

When I communicate, name what I believe or feel or sense or want or need, the question is this: do you owe me something, your understanding for example? Or is my communication more like sonar, waves sent into the environment that then teach me something about the environment by how they bounce back? Teach me, in essence, about impact.

It is possible to be with a very active physical listener. It is possible to be with someone who is very silent and still listening. Both ways of listening can be deeply connected or just performing connections. The way we feel someone listening when they are silent is not through the same part of our brain that understands how someone is listening when they nod or verbally agree. The way I can feel your attention, your listening, your connection with me is about attunement. It's the way life reflects, attends to, attunes to other life. We attune with all of our selves.

When I felt unsettled around that quiet listener who, I didn't know, that I could feel strong in what I was saying, I didn't heart-know, belly-know, and brain-know that I could deeply trust what I was saying, no matter the response from the listener. This conditioning is so very old, this sense of life-validation that comes from external responses rather than deep in-knowing. It is then shaped by how the environment and social context tell you about your value. If your people have lived for three generations or more within this kin-shaping, focused on privatized individuals whose value is determined by a mix of characteristics like color, gender, body shape, and productivity, if you and your parents and grandparents grew up to be adults and then raised babies in this mess, then there is some part of you that puts your value on an external audience rather than your in-knowing.

In early 2021, I was invited to participate in a public conversation after the presidential inauguration. I had never done something like this. It was at

a scale I was not used to. I was invited to converse with two people I had not met before, although I deeply respected their work. I kept saying to my friends: well, shit. This is different. I can't rest in the relationships. I have to ground deeply, trust what I am saying as an isolated individual talking to four thousand people I can't see on a blank screen. I am told by people who heard it that I did fine. I know that I did not. I could not find my breath. I could not remember why I was there. I mostly just talked because, well, there was a camera and four thousand people. At one point, someone on the panel said that the way they know they trust people is not by what they say, but by how they embody their own words. How they live their lives. I wanted to scream: Yes! This is why I don't like this moment, because we don't know each other and all I have to offer you are words.

Which is true, but which was also another way of hiding. As embarrassing as it is to admit at my age, I also didn't like it because the practice demanded that I know my own truth. That I speak from my belly, heart, and mind to a room of people I couldn't see but who I could still attune to. And I couldn't do it. I blanked, I froze, I was frightened. The sound waves I was sending out were not bouncing back from anything.

There are two things I learned from the impact of this experience: I still have work to do on trusting my own words. I don't like being on a panel in front of lots of people without having some time to build relationships with the moderator and other panelists.

This is the perfect race/gender set up: racially there is the privilege of whiteness which says that when I communicate, I am entitled to a response. Gender-wise, there is the need for patriarchy to stay in control and keep white ciswomen in their place—we are entitled to expect a response and the response determines whether or not we are entitled to feel safe and secure. I am entitled to speak and your response tells me if I matter. It's still all about entitlement, about power, about transaction. It's not about being grounded within our own lives and then more deeply and authentically connected to other life.

Similarly, many of us are raised knowing that part of communication is proving to others what we have experienced and know so that we can stay safe. We are not raised to expect listening and understanding from those around us who are not kin but to instead assume the responsibility is on us to find a way to be heard, on their terms and so that they are comfortable.

Many of us are raised with this way of becoming visible to others, particularly those raised within violence or raised to expect violence. It's one of the expectations, one of the ever-present strategies of white supremacy: Native folks, Black folks, people of color, immigrants of color, and refugees of color are not entitled, says white supremacy, to communicate the truth of their life on their own terms, or to expect not-kin to believe in that truth, or to feel safe if not-kin doesn't understand or agree. Instead, your job is to convince white folks of your worth, although the criteria can change on a shift in the breeze. It's about power and transaction, not communication as a form of self-expression but communication as a strategy for survival.

Is it any wonder that so many of us turn to gaslighting? Isn't gaslighting a manipulation of what is being said and understood so that the gaslighter has the power of being right, which means validated, which means safe?

In bodywork sessions and when I work with groups, I often say: let my words be like sonar. Whether they are right or wrong doesn't matter as much as what they spark alive in you. Let's work with what comes alive in you rather than with coming together in agreement around my words. If what they spark is curiosity, then ask questions and be with wonder. If they spark a fuck-you, then be angry and push! How does the sonar pulse of my life forming itself into words impact how your life is listening to itself and the world around you?

I like this because it takes the burden off me of getting something "right" for you, a being living a life that I am not living. My words are only an expression of my life, not of yours. Sometimes the words spark some connection and we feel it, leaning in closer, sharing more words, feeling that pleasure. Sometimes they do not connect us, but this doesn't mean that the words rising up in our bodies are not still the language of our lives.

How much of struggle is mostly about fighting for whose words are right, most accurate, or most needing to be understood?

Let's be like bats and whales, swiftlets and dolphins: speak or sign or shrug our words as vibrational waves, watching as they move away from our own bodies, pushing out to meet another life. What happens when the waves meet life? Is it what we expected? What comes alive in them and, as a result, what comes alive in us?

# BUILDING COLLECTIVE LIBERATION: A PROTOCOL FOR HEALERS

*By healers I mean manual therapists, energy healers, movement practitioners, movement healers, therapists, especially somatic or narrative-based, nurses, physicians, and anyone else doing care work for people's hearts, minds, bodies, care that is grounded in a belief in the dignity and sovereignty of the individual as part of a larger collective community. Which also means many types of organizers. If you identify with the word, then I am talking to you. The language I most like to use is "health and healing practitioners" rather than healers, but that's too long for a title.*

In 2013, a beloved friend and I were invited by local community acupuncture folks to hold a workshop focused on collective ethics within an acupuncture practice. These brilliant practitioners wanted to find a way to help acupuncturists get their necessary Continuing Education Units while also supporting them in expanding their idea of an individual practice to one that builds collective power. They wanted the concept of an ethical practice to move from primarily focusing on individual behavior to including practices of collective accountability. The question we asked in the workshop was: what is the relationship between your practice and the healthcare conditions of the town where you live? What is your ethical responsibility to those conditions?

We asked the room to commit to two agreements before we began. The first was this: we know that racism, white supremacy, sexism, transphobia, ableism, poverty and other forms of oppression exist. We know that these things have an impact. Therefore, we know that they have an impact on the people who come to see us. We want our practices to be in relationship to the breadth of struggles, as well as the glorious breadth of resilience, that our clients experience.

The second was this: all healing traditions evolve as part of culture. When healing traditions shift from one cultural tradition to another, they continue to evolve and shift. Acupuncture evolved in China for thousands of years.

U.S. acupuncture is connected to that history but is also connected to the history of healthcare, mainstream and not, within the U.S.

The workshop was powerful for me, as it was the first time I got to work with healers within a specific modality who were committed to a liberatory practice. It was also, like all things, only the beginning. It was informed by—and continues to inform—the work I have been doing, along with Cara Page and Anjali Taneja, on transforming the medical industrial complex. And it raised the question, which I continue to sit within, of how to teach practices, along with the specific techniques of acupuncture, massage, craniosacral therapy, chiropractic, polarity work, and so on, that build collective power, collective accountability, and help to heal our collective bodies as well as our individual ones.

#### Right Relationship to the History of Your Practice

When I was part of the U.S. Social Forum organizing in Detroit in 2009, we did—and asked all practitioners we worked with to do—something pretty simple. When offering our practice to someone, we started with these three things: describe your practice, name its cultural lineage, and name why you personally have felt drawn to this lineage. We asked people to tell it as a truth of what they knew and what they didn't.

We also pointed out that this is not something you do once, coming up with an easy answer that you just repeat at every session. Instead, it is something you live into. For the rest of our lives. Each question gives birth to more questions:

Who are the people who lived lives that they shaped into teachings you have learned from? What happened to them? Are their descendants still freely and easily practicing these traditions, on their own terms and supported by their own elders? If they are, how can you honor these descendants and their elders, showing gratitude for how their practices have taught you? If they are not, how does this shape your gratitude? What can you do to support their descendants in any of their work to reclaim their languages, traditions, and cultural practices?

Why did you feel drawn to this particular lineage? Where did you first learn about it? What did you think or hope for when you first encountered the teachings of this lineage? What about your life experience resonated with what you are learning?

What are your people's relationship to the people who created this practice? Was there harm there? Connection and mutual learning? Distance and ignorance? If there was harm, what are you doing to repair that harm? How are you working to make sure that, as you learn and are deepened by these cultural traditions and practices, the descendants of those who gave birth to this practice are also cared for and cared about, on their own terms and in their own ways?

From this, follow questions relating to the people you practice would serve. Who are the communities of people where you live? Who is your work accessible to and who is it not accessible to—accessible economically, geographically, physically, and all of the other ways people determine whether or not, as a practitioner, you are safe or able to meet them? Are any of the people in lineage relationship to those whose practices you have learned? If they are, do you charge them? How do you name your work in relationship to their lives?

#### Right Relationship to All of the People Where You Live

Every aspect of our wellness, our overall health, our experience of our own lives is also directly connected to historical and present violence and disregard. In the United States we have federal, state, and local government bodies (if they have not been defunded) focused solely on addressing racial and ethnic health disparities, because they are that massive and that ongoing. There is more and more research proving what kin have been talking about around kitchen tables and in meeting spaces for five hundred years and more: that the impact of small and large forms of oppressive violence and structural inequality directly impacts our health and wellness. And that this impact, along with the resiliency and glory of our people, is passed forward from one generation to the next. The CDC–Kaiser Permanente study on Adverse Childhood Experiences, despite its faults, also shows, again what traditional knowledge has always known, that if we deeply and thoroughly love and care for our children, we will radically decrease the kinds of physical, social, emotional, mental, and systemic struggles that many of us face as adults.<sup>1</sup> This also means deeply and thoroughly caring for those who care for our children, from parents to teachers to everyone else who encircles our youngest.

I know that folks reading this are not all from the U.S. Some of you live in places where healthcare systems are part of the basic infrastructure of a community. Many of you are watching as those systems erode into privatized systems. In the United States, there is a direct relationship between a person's private wealth and their race. I am sure that for everyone reading this, U.S.-based or not, there is some relationship between who holds wealth and who holds political or cultural or racial power. In the U.S., it is very clear: Black and Indigenous folks are the least likely to hold any "extra" wealth (or resources) and white folks are the most likely to have enough extra to buy things: like access to a bodywork session or any kind of care outside their health insurance coverage. This includes access to health insurance that actually covers the kind of care that they need.

As health and healing practitioners, as social workers and therapists, we have a choice to make. If we are not attuning our work to this truth then we are part of the overall problem. Go to almost any bodywork or "alternative" medicine class or therapy program and, aside from a few locations in the U.S., you will still see a sea of mostly white faces. The majority of health and healing practitioners, students, and teachers in the U.S. who are not part of multigenerational, community-based, culturally grounded lineages are folks with some amount of social and economic privilege. This certainly includes me. It's set up that way: the costs of training are often prohibitive and you need significant unpaid time to learn and then build a practice. Additionally, most of these programs are taught in a closed-circle way: white, Euro-dominant curriculum, cultural frames, and learning styles are taught by white-dominant teachers to largely white-dominant student bodies.

Every one of us deserves care that honors the dignity and sovereignty of our bodies and our kin. When nonmainstream care practices are isolated into closed loops of student-teacher relationships and those student-teacher relationships are largely representative of those who have the most social and economic power in any given society, then we become part of the medical industrial complex. This means we are part of historical systems of violence, the original wounds of this land, that have shaped who has access to the branded "freedom" of the U.S. and whose lives are sacrificed or minimized. We become and we are part of this violence even if we believe in our practice's ability to support someone in far deeper, holistic, and/or

respectful ways than those they can get through diagnostic-based or insurance-covered care.

Questions to ask yourself as a health and healing practitioner: Where do you live? Who else lives there, in your local area? What are the histories there, the contexts and conditions surrounding you and your practice? What are the economic or cultural differences in your geographic community? Where do garbage burners, dump sites, industrial zones, toxic runoff into rivers and lakes, highways, and other pollution sources exist, now or over the last two generations? Who lives there? Where are the gas lines being planned, the new mining contracts being set, the fracking zones being established? If you live on or near a reservation, how is this land being impacted by these industries, recognizing that a disproportionate amount of new environmentally hazardous technologies are being sited at traditional lands? What, as a result of this, are the healthcare conditions of the people, the neighborhoods, the communities that make up the interdependent web that is a village, town, or city? Where is opioid use (and death), alcoholism, and suicide most prevalent in your communities? Who are they impacting and why? How is stress related to displacement, poverty, state violence, and relocation impacting the people and the communities where you live? How are *you* impacted by this, no matter who you are and who your people are? These are only a few questions. There are miles and miles more of them.

If you don't know the answers to these questions, ask yourself why. If you do, but your practice does not address these conditions, ask yourself why?

Who is doing what kind of work to shift these deep (and violent) inequities? In particular, who is doing this work of change who is also directly impacted by the systems they are trying to change? Is there a way you can support them? Who are the healers and health practitioners who live near you, people you are already in relationship with or on the edge of relationship? Can you organize a circle and be committed to sitting with these questions and looking for opportunities for right action for the next five, ten, twenty years, for the life of your practice and beyond? Who do you build relationships with to offer your services, making sure that those who you are supporting are determining how and when and why your support might matter?

Will you let this change your practice and your understanding of what healing is ... and isn't?

## Building Collective Power

This is a lot, right? It's why we build movements: because complex systems are impossible to change individually. What does it mean to build collective power among health and healing practitioners, among therapists and social workers? I don't know what the step-by-step strategy is; that is more than a single person should envision. But I have some questions, practices, and steps to offer, with the hopes that you reach out and offer more. Some of these are about shifting our schools, their curriculum, and who has access to the learning. Some are about who we imagine building relationships with in this work. Some are about a set of practices that we do so that we are transformed within our work. They are all about connecting your practice to others for the purpose of building collective power, being accountable within your practice to someone besides yourself, accountable to those who come to see you for care.

How do we become the practitioners who truly make another world possible? This is, of course, a conversation about organizing work, about strategies and generations. These are only a start, but what would it mean if healing practitioners signed on to platforms like those named below and then built relationships with each other, listening for the next steps for action and transformation that will help reweave individual healing and collective care together. The potential actions listed are only a very few ideas for what could be possible:

- We understand that historical and generational trauma are real. We know that systems (of race, gender, class, etc.) operate on our bodies and impact our lives. We recognize as healers and healing practitioners that it is our responsibility to learn and deepen our practice in attending to these truths with every person we work with.
  - Potential action: Demand that training integrates social, collective, racial, gender, class, ableist, generational, and historical trauma into what and how they teach. When training doesn't change, support those who want to teach from this perspective to create and offer alternative trainings.
- We recognize and lift up the cultural and historical lineages of the practices we use. We recognize and honor the many generations of individuals who have built these practices within their own cultural and historical contexts. We seek to be in right relationship to the ancestor-elders of the healing traditions we practice.

- o Potential action: If you learn from any lineage that is not your own and if the cultural community that holds that lineage today is under attack, make a commitment to tie your practice to resistance to those attacks.
  - o Potential action: Teach every client you work with, in one way or another, about the history of your lineage, how you understand your responsibility to repair, and how their healing is connected to this repair as part of the broader work of weaving ourselves back into relationship with each other rather than healing further into isolated individualism.
- We recognize that there is no such thing as a “normal” body. We honor the right of each individual to name what healing, wellness, or care mean for them.
  - O Potential action: learn how to talk about anatomy, reproduction, and healing from a place that honors an individual or community’s right to decide what healing is for them. Resist the idea of a “cure.” Read the words of disability justice activists.
  - O Potential action: demand that your teachers and other practitioners bring these changes into how they teach and talk about their work.
  - O Potential action: learn how to talk about bodies without attaching gender to anatomy, learning how to use gender-neutral language to describe reproductive organs and other parts of the body.
- We advocate apprentice-model learning for those interested in learning modalities. This might include working with schools and other training facilities to broaden their accessibility and cultural alignment. We do this in order to make learning more accessible and to make sure that, when we are students, we are guided in a thoughtful and thorough process that is as much about who we are as practitioners as it is the techniques we use.
  - O Potential action: find teachers in your community who are willing to engage in an apprenticeship model. Help raise money and support for people who are interested in learning practices they can’t afford. Find a way to support teachers who want to teach outside inflexible institutions, supporting them to teach on their own while supported by community?
- We advocate for, create, and demand curricula that can speak to the breadth of lives in our communities, that are articulated through word and experience to address historical, generational, social, cultural, and collective trauma and resilience, as well as individual and targeted trauma and resilience. We advocate for, create, and demand teachers and teaching assistants able to teach these things.
- We work to find ways, as concrete and local as possible, to ensure access to these classes by those who have not traditionally had access. We also work to support those schools and classes that are

traditional and culturally grounded for students for generations to come. This means we come up with economic and practical strategies around money, support, and access that expand who gets to be a practitioner, on their own terms and in right relationship to their own cultures and communities.

- We work to collectively define sliding-scale practices, practices around payment scales, and peer-to-peer collective learning networks. This includes being in conversations about wealth and the accumulation of wealth. Just as the body asks us, we ask each other in community: what is enough? And we ask, how do we ensure that all people in need of care have access to care that supports the dignity of their lives and beliefs?
- We share an evolving code of ethics that is grounded in and aware of the impact cultural and power differences have on health and healing practitioners within communities, the impact of trauma in the practitioner-client relationship, the centrality of a client's safety and liberation as well as the safety and liberation of the practitioner.
- And finally, and most importantly, we build solidarity and common-cause relationships with other people working in healthcare who might or might not identify in the same way. This could include SEIU and the multiple nurses' unions, homecare workers through the National Domestic Workers Alliance, UNITE and food service workers who provide nutritional care at hospitals and other care spaces, and others.

I don't know how to do the work I do without this sort of overarching program. As with a bodywork session, I don't know exactly what the work is building toward, although I hope it is a shift in pain levels, a greater sense of self and aliveness, and an expanded capacity for life and connection. The work is the same when working with the collective body. I don't know how to get to where we are going nor can I fully imagine it, because my imagination is limited by what I have already experienced. But I do believe in practice; the steady accumulation of change over a period of time. That is how evolution works. That is how relationships are formed. And I deeply believe that that is how revolution happens.

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1. Vincent J. Felitti, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1, 1998): 245–258.

# ALIGNING THE RELATIONAL FIELD: ON RETELLING THE STORY OF CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY FOR ALL HEALING PRACTITIONERS

*Thank you, thank you, and thank you again to Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona for his commitment to making the Cherokee and Shawnee medicine ways remembered and celebrated within my lineage.<sup>1</sup> Thank you also to Hugh Milne, who is the only white craniosacral therapy teacher I have ever had who named the origins of this work as more than a white man in the 1800s.<sup>2</sup> The base experience, memory and research, is theirs, and I have only added to it and then woven it into story.*

*While this is about craniosacral therapy, it's really about any lineage of healing, change-work, or cultural connection. It's about remembering.*

*This love letter is written for one of my lineage-ancestors, Andrew Stills.*

First, this thing we call craniosacral therapy refers to, very simply, working with the craniosacral system or that fluid system that surrounds your brain and spinal cord and moves into and across your whole nervous system.

Within the craniosacral world, there are many different approaches. Some of our people work with this system as a kind of hydraulic system, seeing the bones (in particular) as the levers that regulate flow. Some craniosacral approaches are strongly focused on the specificities of anatomy, and others are focused on listening to these fluid patterns as energy patterns. Most of the schools have all or some of what I am talking about, but there is real difference in approach and framework. All of us, or at least I think that all of us, use light touch over heavy, deep listening, and an awareness of the body's tides as the foundation of our work.

Craniosacral therapy is a dance, a dance between the contraction of membrane and the expansion of fluid. It is our birthright, that place where life as mystery first emerges and then expands to fill this structure that we call a body. There are many different craniosacral techniques and they all do something similar: support the body to find its balance within any given

moment—on its own terms and at a speed that makes sense for its desire to change. Some forms of cranio are more direct in that change, still operating from consent but bringing in, what one of my teachers described as the force of a tugboat on a large ocean liner. Small, direct, and steady over time. Other forms carry no direction at all, just the physicality of witness and the deep trust that, when supported, the body knows its own way.

We who live today are not smarter or wiser about the body than any of our people have been across thousands of years. If anything, we are probably more awkward and cut off than our ancestors. Whatever body technologies we stumble across or dream awake during this later industrial age, it is guaranteed that those technologies have been understood and deepened at other less distracted, less earth-numbed times. Being humble about this makes us better healing folk.

Craniosacral therapy is a form of bonesetting, a tradition that has existed since long before homo sapiens. There is evidence that our Neanderthal cousins practiced it, so we can assume that other hominid groups practiced versions of the same thing. Bonesetting is still practiced in many parts of the world including in Russia, India, China, and in many cultures of what are called the Americas. In bonesetting, a practitioner works with the bones as living animate forms, using a mix of gentle and strong touch to settle the bones differently in the surrounding soft tissue. There are bonesetting traditions and bonesetters that work closer to what we call chiropractic work and those who work closer to biodynamic craniosacral work.

None of this is new. Our neanderthal relatives used plant medicine and they touched each other. It is likely that in this touching, they also knew how to listen to what is happening within, to lightly touch the fluid-membrane link and support or witness as unwinding and unraveling begins to happen. The oldest known text on what the West calls traditional Chinese medicine, written over four thousand years ago, makes reference to the art of “listening and calming” the heart through touching the body very lightly. A whole range of early texts, drawings, and sculpture from the same time, across what we now call Egypt and India, show images of touch healing, both strong touch—like massage—and light touch—like craniosacral therapy. One of the oldest books in the world, the *I-Ching*, teaches: “keeping the hips still, making his sacrum stiff, dangerous, the heart suffocates.”

We can split the origins of craniosacral therapy into two different columns. On one side lie the thousands of years of practice and learning that is our shared ancestral birthright. It's what is written in thousands of ancient texts. It's what is still taught today in an unbroken line in many geographies, although called other things. It's one of the ways we have always loved each other.

Then there is a gap before we get to the other column—a space of forgetting that exists in Western European histories. It represents a period of moving away from interdependence and collective survival and knowing the land as that which creates and nourishes these physical bodies we call home. This gap marks an arc toward individualism and land and bodies that can be controlled and owned, a time of forgetting and the creation of cultural practices like white supremacy, patriarchy, land enclosure, privatization, and wealth accumulation. It is in this gap that all this begins to feel normal and expected, a forced forgetting of stealing people from their home and stealing homes from the people; Christian missionaries, boarding schools, and other strategies to kill, assimilate, or disappear anyone who still remembered, in their own way, with their own languages. This forgetting is still going on in expanding and deepening circles.

And, within the forgetting, there is remembering. The field of craniosacral therapy sits within this second column, a kind of remembering that includes dreaming and ancestral/spirit in-knowing and listening. Craniosacral therapy would not be a remembering without Andrew Taylor Still's relationships with Cherokee and Shawnee healers.

As the story goes, Andrew Taylor Still, a U.S.-born-and-raised white man, began the field of osteopathy in or around 1849. He was a white man raised to be a rationalist who was willing to believe something other than what he had been taught.

Andrew Still grew up in a family that had at least four generations of intimate encounters and relationships with nearby Shawnee people. Some of Still's ancestors lost their lives and/or were taken captive by Shawnee people fighting the encroachment of settler farming. There are stories that Still's mother was actually mixed blood, Shawnee and European, although she was mostly situated in whiteness and raised her children there. Still spoke Shawnee and farmed on Shawnee reservation land. He learned doctoring during the Civil War and then practiced on his farm and with the

Shawnee community he lived among. Nita Renfrew, a student of Lewis Mehl-Medrona's student (a writer and physician who has done much to help remember and reclaim aboriginal styles of healing and healthcare), lays out more of what happened:

[A]lthough [Dr. Still] never said where he had learned his musculoskeletal and organ massage techniques, which he called Osteopathy, he is known to have alluded to the bone-setting methods of the Shawnee at least once, as reported by the director of the Museum of Osteopathic Medicine in a lecture, who added that Still often used "the phrase 'Taking an Indian look' at something. Forgetting what you know and just to quietly observe with no thoughts." ... [W]hen he started his medical practice, he advertised himself as a "magnetic healer" and "lightning bonesetter" before naming his methods Osteopathic Medicine.<sup>3</sup>

Still was an abolitionist. He was friends with John Brown, served time as a state legislator, and worked to keep Kansas a free state rather than a state with legalized slavery. He had social power. He was the cofounder of a college, he patented a more efficient butter churn, and he "started" the medical field of osteopathy.

His most famous student, William Sutherland, was in his senior year at Stills American School Of Osteopathy in Kirksville when he examined a collection of bone specimens mounted in a display case at the college, including a disarticulated skull. In a story that you hear repeated in craniosacral schools everywhere, Sutherland was struck "as if from a bolt from the blue." He looked at the squamosal suture of the temporal bones, the rolling-overlap joint between the temporal and the parietal bone. He heard the words, "Beveled, like the gills of a fish, indicating articular mobility for a respiratory mechanism."<sup>4</sup>

Craniosacral therapy proper begins with Sutherland, the first person in this tradition to identify the cranial wave and to begin working with many of the practices we learn today. He published his book *The Cranial Bowl* in 1939 and had numerous students who carried on his work, resulting in a range of schools and approaches.<sup>5</sup> Two of the more well-known, Hugh Milne and Franklin Sills, are alive right now. Their work matters. And so does the context around it, the lives and encounters that allowed their work

to emerge. Those details have disappeared and that disappearance is not neutral. It has shaped—and limited—craniosacral therapy’s possibility, and what is possible in the realm of healing.<sup>6</sup>

Let me retell the origin story, or notice what possibly did happen, just a few dimensions over: an alternate history and possible future unfurling from when Andrew Still first began to awake.

When Andrew Still meets with and lives alongside Cherokee and Shawnee healers, he talks with them about how it would be appropriate to share their healing methods. He is grateful for the encounter, noticing how ancient places within him wake up when he sits with these teachers. He feels deep grief; knowing that since 1540, when Cherokee people first came into contact with Europeans, this has been a relationship of taking and harm more often than respect and care. He is shaking and grieving as he learns the wisdom of touch at the same time as he hears his teachers and their kin tell him stories of forced removal, of forced marches, of violence after violence wrought at the hands of his people. If it is true that his mother’s line is also Shawnee, maybe he grieves what has been lost within his own family. Maybe he also grieves what has been lost through his European lines.

This is not a recounting of facts. I don’t want this to be a recounting of facts. When I first published this piece on my blog, some craniosacral therapists mentioned how emotional I get. They felt that the intensity of my emotion took away from the message I was trying to share. But even now, rewriting and rereading, that emotion is still here. I love my practice. When I feel these stories and lineages, I am filled with grief. I am filled with anger. And I am filled with resolve, a sense of earth rising up that lands in my belly and says *never again*.

This is what I want to know from my ancestor of lineage: Andrew Still, how did you not fall to your knees? You and your kin were building a life, an intimacy, an identity in direct relationship to the Shawnee elders and children you lived alongside. You saw the increasing violence and control that pushed toward the disappearance of those who taught you “the Indian way,” a way you cherished as stronger and more real than the ways of your kin. You were there, living through all of it, fighting for the end of slavery, fighting for the right for the body to be known and heard, watching as around you the science of eugenics began to emerge, watching as the

collective dehumanization of this country's origins took another step toward normalizing itself as the way of this land.

How did you not collapse beneath the full weight of what was happening?

I imagine you listening to the stories of the animals, trees, and medicinal plants that have disappeared from these lands, tear-streaked face marveling at the stories of flocks of bright yellow and green parrots that once filled the skies. I have to go to another place, a few dimensions over, to listen because I can't stand staying in this one, where too many descendants of your teaching do not see it as our responsibility to do more than work with a single body at a time.

In this other dimension, the one that might have happened here but didn't, Andrew Still takes time, listening but also finding ways to help, ways that his teachers recognize as helpful, consensual. As he does this, an idea forms. Not just the idea of a school. Still knows that this work has the possibility to not only support the realignment of bones and the softening of tissue, but also to remake worlds. He knows that this is only possible if the work is taught in alignment with its deepest values, which include not only honoring but being an active participant in the fight to recognize and respect Cherokee and Shawnee sovereignty and the sovereignty of every other Indigenous person living on these lands.

What we call craniosacral fluid, what Hugh Milne calls liquid electricity, is the same fluid found in all life. It is sea water, it is home. Sensing and knowing this, feeling a deep desire for justice and connection in all forms, it is not difficult to move from supporting the body to supporting the rhythms between bodies.

Still's knowledge would have shaped his teachings to not separate individual healing from collective pain. The people he would eventually teach would have to be in right and deepening relationship to the elders and communities where these teachings originated. They would have to learn how to listen simultaneously to the life of a single body and the life of a community of bodies. He would build, at the speed of trust, relationships with healers and practitioners from the communities around him, developing a school and a practice, whose work is as much about repairing the collective wounds of history as it is about caring for the way those histories show up in an individual body.

There is more there, in that place a few dimensions over. I can't recognize

a lot of it, because it's a way of being that I have never witnessed in real time. But like the body's arc toward its own experience of balance, I can feel it and sense it. What I do see in that dimension is thousands and thousands of craniosacral therapists, just like there are here. It doesn't matter if we are called the same thing. We share a similar grandparent. In that other dimension, we are six generations deep into training in which healer/organizers need not compromise any part of their deepest humanity when doing this work. In that alternate reality, our teachers represent a range of cultural experiences and lineages of touch, and there is no confusion about how we hold power and attention to those lineages. Our roots have never ever strayed from Still's early refusal to collude with Cherokee and Shawnee disappearance nor to stop the work of abolition even after the legal institution of slavery ended.

Since writing the first version of this piece in early 2020, I have had many healers reach out and ask me how to build practices that center this acknowledgment, support, and respect. Or they have proudly shared stories of the land and lineage acknowledgment they now bring into their work. I am grateful for this, everything is a part of a larger something. But here is also how I respond: our work is not about what we do, but about who we are. It's about land and lineage acknowledgments, but it's also about the actions surrounding them.

About ten years ago, I was in northern Minnesota with a beloved teacher. She is Haudenosaunee and adopted into Ojibwe communities. She speaks fluent Ojibwe, although is very humble about that, and spends much of her time listening to elders and then teaching children. We were walking in some woods and I remarked on how beautiful the birch trees were. She agreed and then pointed out to me signs of how the birch trees were suffering. I had not noticed the black tumor-like expansions along the bark, or hadn't noticed them as anything other than part of the tree. She explained that this was a sign of birch in distress. Looking around the woods, she reflected that the birch trees would probably be completely gone in another generation.

I gasped and asked, without thinking, if there was anything we could do? After all, people all over this land were doing different kinds of prairie restoration. Is there anything like birch restoration that would be possible? I knew the question was foolish even as I asked it, and still, the question

came bursting out of my learned-to-be-a-savior mouth.

She smiled at me and even laughed. What arrogance, she said, lovingly. This is the mind of colonization. How, she said, can any human mind believe it has the skillset to come up with single answers that could deal with or even conceptually hold the massive complexity that is a forest? Every time humans do this, force our ideas on a complex life system, we just end up causing a different set of problems. No, she said, just no. Climate change is already happening. The birch trees are moving further north. This will no longer be a place for them.

This, she said, is what it means to be a part of something, to be connected to that which is greater than we are. Not the most important part or the smartest or the most responsible. Just a part. And because we are just a part we have a role. We don't always know what it is, but it is there. And so we listen. We observe. We wait. When there is an action to take, it will be clear to us. We will know it as well as we know that we are breathing. We take that action and, again, we wait. Observing. Watching. Until it is time for another action. The consciousness of the connectedness that is all life; it is moving toward its own pattern. Every life form wants to heal, to connect, and to repair. Sometimes it takes time. We wait and watch for our part. We pray. We ask. We grieve. We feel all the things, and we wait.

Her teaching is the essence of biodynamic craniosacral therapy, this listening and waiting for some part of the body, as complex within our skin as the earth is around us, to show us if there is any action we need to take. When I pray for the other dimension, the one where Andrew Still did not just birth osteopathy which became craniosacral therapy, I see the birth of a resistance and reconnection movement that understands how land, economies, relationships, and spirit are all tied together. How no one is healed, grounded, or safe until we are all healed, grounded, and safe.

I know many craniosacral therapists who do powerful work supporting people to reconnect with their own bodies and lives. For some of them, this also includes reconnecting to spirit which then also sometimes means land. Reconnecting with and repairing kin and community doesn't just mean working with those like us. We must connect with everyone, those who are struggling, those who have been betrayed by our people, those who did the betraying. If we do one piece of the work without holding close all of the others, then we are like the white power structure in the South that, instead

of ending racism and white supremacy, created “separate but equal” structures (which they never were) to paint Black folks as dangerous criminals and white folks as the protected, vulnerable class. If we only focus on the issues of the person on the table with us and absolutely ignore what is happening outside of our windows—what it means that we charge hundreds of dollars an hour while getting our car detail cleaned by someone making minimum wage—then we are replicating the original wound of settlers who came to lands to take.

In 2015, I spent part of my time giving bodywork at the occupation site outside the Fourth Precinct in Minneapolis. This was after Jamar Clark had been murdered by the police on November 15th, just a few blocks down from the precinct. After I’d done a few times of bodywork, a friend of mine, a Black elder, called and asked me what I was noticing in the bodies of the people I was tending. I had never been asked this before. I had never been asked what patterns I was seeing, what truth the tissues were telling. I shared with him what I was sensing, the mix of tightness and just below, the collapse of despair. I talked about lungs and heart and the buzzing that was there, loud and just below the occipital edge. I named the differences in bodies, and what was the same. For my friend, this was just a quick check-in, a way for him to gather information that helped his heart and mind to be clear about the actions he wanted to take. For me, his question was life changing.

How do we become completely different bodies practicing our healing fields? We listen and we learn how to share, not to gather more social capital but to be a part of it all, to know ourselves deeply as part of it all. And we apply this not just to the bodies on the table but to the connected whole of life outside our doors. In the same way that we notice the constriction, the dry tightness of tissue around the hinge of the knee, we notice the constriction, the dry tightness around the body of a police officer as they move through a neighborhood or the contracted physicality of a woman as she walks down the street. As much as we learn the conditions of a human body so that we can listen to its stories and rhythms, we learn the conditions of the communities we are a part of.

We listen, we watch, and then we wait. We do whatever work we need to do so that, when the action comes through clear and connected, we are able to move with it, rather than retreat from it.

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1. You can follow Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona's work here: [mehl-madrona.com](http://mehl-madrona.com).
  2. Most of the comparative histories of touch-based modalities similar to craniosacral therapy that I know come to me from work classes I took with Hugh Milne in the early 2000s. You can follow Hugh Milne's work here: [milneinstitute.com](http://milneinstitute.com).
  3. Nita Renfrew, "Traditional American Indian Bodywork, the Origin of Osteopathy, Polarity, and Craniosacral Therapy," *Journal of Contemporary Shamanism* 8 (2015): 28.
  4. Adah Strand Sutherland, *With Thinking Fingers: The Story of William Garner Sutherland* (Indianapolis: The Cranial Academy, 1962), 13.
  5. William G. Sutherland, *The Cranial Bowl: A Treatise Relating to Cranial Articular Mobility, Cranial Articular Lesions and Cranial Technic*, (Mankato, MN: The Free Press Company, 1939).
  6. If you are interested in learning more about these roots of craniosacral therapy, there is plenty of information online. The Museum of Osteopathic Medicine has a lot of primary source material here: [atsu.edu/museum-of-osteopathic-medicine/museum-at-still](http://atsu.edu/museum-of-osteopathic-medicine/museum-at-still). The text and images from a lecture by the museum's director, Jason Haxton, are here: [johnwernhamclassicalosteopathy.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Dr-Andrew-Taylor-Stills-Observations-About-Nature.pdf](http://johnwernhamclassicalosteopathy.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Dr-Andrew-Taylor-Stills-Observations-About-Nature.pdf). Dr. Domenick J. Masiello provides a brief history of Osteopathy on his website: [drmasiello.com/history-of-osteopathy](http://drmasiello.com/history-of-osteopathy).

## ENDING: SO, WHAT COMES NEXT?

Everything is changing rapidly. I've just had one of those fortnights where my social media stream is full of people passing: friend's parents, people a generation older than me, and, amid all of them, a child. No one super close in the way of daily noticing the hole of their passing, but lots of people who make up that hazy but intimate background of community. My heart hurts.

Our bodies remember and, in remembering, they communicate with us. This needs to be attended to, they say. That needs to be noticed. Most of the time, when we listen, they are asking us to either reconnect to or repair ourselves, our kin and community, the land, spirit. They are asking us to remember, even when we don't and likely never will have all of the details of the story. *Reconnect. Repair.*

I am not sure who taught me this, and so if you are reading these words and you are the one who shared this with me, please reach out. I quote you often: the breath holds the present, the body holds the past, and the mind holds the future.

Go ahead. Pay attention to your breath for three inhales and exhales. Just your breath. The feeling of it, the warmth of it, its movement. You can't do that without being attuned to the present moment.

Now, imagine the words you are reading suddenly starting to twirl in a circle on the page. Maybe all of the periods turn into bright, red, blinking lights. Go ahead, imagine it. It's amazing what our mind can do. Without this ability, we would not be able to write a book, read a book, stay warm when it is cold outside, or find better ways to protect and love water. Our mind has the capacity to imagine what is not happening. It's how we imagine forwards, strategize, and plan. It's how we envision something different for our descendants and then take the steps needed to get there.

And our body remembers the past. That is what this whole book has been about; how the body holds what is unfinished and painful as well as what is glorious and good. We time travel because that is one of the ways we learn. Wisdom is what happens when time traveling is brought into the present moment and teaches and transforms us.

We need all of them: our breath in the present, our minds of strategy and

vision, and our bodies of memory and more. Sometimes, we somatic or body-based types can be dismissive of thinking. Privileging the body or the breath over the action of the mind in an attempt to bring some kind of reactive balance to the mind-only approach of Western overculture. That is as disrespectful to our ancestors as forgetting to feel how our life animates our feet and how our hands, with more sensory nerves than any other part of the body, are about connection and touch.

When we breathe, we breathe in the life expressions of trees and bushes and algae and moss. When we breathe, we bring in the stress and pleasure hormones of everyone nearby, the shape and taste of what they ate or smoked or drank. When we breathe, we breathe in the chemicals rising off polyester blankets and out of smokestacks and sprayed on lawns to keep the weeds away. Our mind creates based on what it has been taught, visioning shapes and stories that are spun together from what we have already learned and where that learning can take us. Our bodies, how we feel or don't feel connection, how we feel pain and how we feel pleasure, are as much about our ancestors as they are about the choices and experiences within our lifetimes.

There is no such thing as individual trauma, even though we sometimes experience it individually. Each moment of absence, of disconnection, swirls around and between many different lives and generations. What could have been done. What might have emerged. What our people witnessed without intervening. What we did to someone we loved. Every overwhelming moment of violence is created by real people in real time. The histories that led to this moment were created by real people in real time. Aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and more. This shouldn't minimize the fact of violence but make it more intimate. More personal. And not just for those who are getting hurt.

At Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP) in the Twin Cities, one of the CARERs (an acronym for Community Aid Resourcing Emergency Responder), Andy, was chatting with a new team as they were training. He laughed, telling them how nervous he was when he was first on dispatch, meaning he was the person waiting to receive a call on our hotline. He worried that he would not do the right thing, be the right person. At one point, he was on the phone with a friend, enjoying himself. The friend had to hang up the phone for a minute and, when it rang again, Andy picked it

up, relaxed, assuming it was the same person. On the other end was someone who needed help, and Andy responded, ready with his heart wide open. He told the CARERS-in-training, “I realized in that moment that I didn’t have anything to be afraid of. All I had to do was pick up the phone. Just that. Pick up the phone. The rest would unwind based on who was there and what they said.”

If there is anything I hope from this book, it is that it supports reflection about what gets in the way of reconnection and commitment, care, so that each one of us is able to do what Andy did: Just pick up the phone. We need only to show up, noticing where there is tightness, where things are hard, and where hearts are open and loving. And then we have to trust, let that be enough, allowing each moment to emerge to show you, in its own way, what comes next.

I want us to do this fiercely, not passively. With strong hands reaching as we say: *this* is what I want, what we want, what we *demand*. Or pushing back hard and saying: no, not this, never again. Emergence does not preclude the fierceness of being deeply clear about our fight response, which is both our yes and our no, in the present moment.

This is why ending violence is the first step in healing because as long as violence is active, just showing up is that much harder, if not impossible.

I forget everything I have said on these pages. All of the time. This is all practice, not just for ourselves but for the seeds that will float out from our struggles—and our calmness—to help feed whatever comes next. Elders-in-training, descendants not yet born.

And now comes the rest of our lives, real people in real time—discerning, choosing, responding, reacting, connecting, isolating, ending violence, remembering ourselves in the present moment, and doing everything we can to change the unfinished histories that trap us away from fully belonging to each other and to the earth that is our home.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for reading this. Truly. My pockets feel a bit lighter with the writing of this book. I'm also going to keep on putting out more material through my website, including different kinds of experiential tools that might be useful. Emptying my pockets.

Part of the story of filling the pockets with stones of knowledge and experience is all of the people who said, shared, or taught what I picked up. What is on this page probably misses as much as it covers. A whole lifetime includes learning from people whose names I never knew. And still ... here is gratitude. To any of you reading this who have been quoted or represented or remembered on these pages, this is my accounting rather than yours. I am sure I have missed details and there is always a good chance that you remember things differently. Any mistakes or errors here are, of course, completely mine.

I am deeply grateful for the land where I live, Mnisota Makoce, the land where water reflects the clouds, this Dakota homeland—the Minnesota River Valley, the many parks and reserved lands within two hours of my home, the extraordinary Louisville Swamp, the boneset that is pushing up through every crack and crevice as I am writing this.

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And finally, not finally, my family which actually includes a lot of people named above. You know how annoying English categorizations are: my mother, Kay, and brother, Jeffrey, nephew Leo, sister-friend Silke and Kirsten, abuelita Carrol and nana Pat, Theresa and Cathy, Nigel, Judith, Cal and Maya, Dona Iara, Mauricio, Ivan, Anna and Lia, Kelly and Brenda and Isaac and Dev

To my partner Rocki and our daughter, Luca. You are written last here only because I wanted you to have all of the space that follows the speaking of your names. There is nothing I do or am that doesn't contain you in it.



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"This book speaks to the relationships we need for our collective liberation.... Raffo speaks to our kin and asks us to shape our relationships to earth, to bodies, to histories, and transformation. Her words are a path toward shedding our fears and building new cosmologies for connection and healing." —**Cara Page**, co-founding member of the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective

"Reading Susan Raffo is like coming home to what we know is true and didn't quite know how to say.... This book is a balm of truth telling, the kind we all long for and rarely find in our current culture of fear and denial." —**Tema Okun**, author of *The Emperor Has No Clothes*

*Liberated to the Bone* addresses the intersections between healing our physical bodies and healing our social relations, which are shaped

by violence. For Susan Raffo, this violence is rooted in the two original wounds: Indigenous disappearance and anti-Black racism. Discussions around the land, intergenerational trauma, social justice, and organizing are all relevant to our bodies. By showing how these approaches are intricately connected—physically and emotionally—Raffo interrupts the traumatic binaries of the political and spiritual, the physical and intellectual, and healing and organizing. Includes a foreword by adrienne maree brown.

Susan Raffo is a writer, cultural worker, and bodyworker. She is part of the Healing Histories Project, which focuses on transforming the medical-industrial complex and confronting eugenic legacies. Raffo works with REP, a Black-led community-based crisis response model grounded in the belief that we have the ability to love and protect one another without giving our agency to systems built to destroy, consume, or commodify us. Editor of *Queerly Classed* and co-author of *Restricted Access*, she is based in Minneapolis, MN.

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